

Chapter 1 – Time, Mr. Potter?

September 14th, 2002

Darkness was falling on the ruins of Lambeth, a suburb of what used to be the city of London. Blasted buildings on either side of the ruined road stood empty, long abandoned by the terrified residents. Entrances stood open like gaping mouths, windows dark and devoid of glass. The tarmac lining the street was cracked and pitted with small craters, evidence of the fighting that had filled the city four years previously.

Apart from a wild dog barking in the distance, all was quiet. That was until two sharp cracks shattered the silence. Harry Potter and Ron Weasley had arrived.

The five years since the Fall of Hogwarts had changed them beyond all recognition. Harry, once a skinny teenage boy, had grown into a well-built young man. His dark hair reached below his shoulders and he sported a few days worth of beard on his rugged chin. His most distinguishing new facial feature, however, was the livid curse scar which ran across his right cheek, a memento of a battle with some vampires three years previously. He was garbed in a tight-fitting t-shirt and trouser combination, both spelled to resist mid-level hexes. A thick pistol was strapped to his thigh, enchanted with various useful enhancements such as self-making ammunition and everclean charms.

Harry's magical abilities were the subject of much speculation on his enemies' part. He had shown natural aptitude for wandless magic, and his spells were certainly more powerful than a normal Death Eater's, but he seemed to lack the flair and diversity which was needed to survive during a duel with someone like Voldemort. In short, the lack of combat experience he had had before the end of his schooling had been a handicap.

Ron had also put on weight, now rather muscular. His face was merely weather-beaten; his distinctive orange hair now cropped short in stark contrast to Harry's flowing locks. He sported his own battle scar, having lost two the fingers of his left hand in an encounter with

Fenrir Greyback, an event which also saw him contracting Lycanthropy, the werewolf disease. Their friendship was unaffected by this; on the contrary it brought them closer together, united in the face of hardship. His outfit was essentially the same as Harry's, designed for combat, with the notable absence of a muggle weapon.

The third member of the classic trio was absent, to the despair of the others. Hermione had been killed six months previously by the Dark Lord himself, on a horcrux raid in Godric's Hollow. She had injured her leg on a defensive ward and couldn't move properly. Death Eaters had begun to arrive, surrounding the decaying wreck of Harry's former home. The horcrux, Hufflepuff's cup, had been destroyed and Harry and Ron had been ready to fight to the last against the overwhelming amounts of Death Eaters, but Hermione had tricked them into port-keying away while she faced the wrath of Voldemort alone. The next time they saw her she had been posthumously added to the infamous Wall of Traitors outside the Ministry headquarters, along with others such as Albus Dumbledore and Remus Lupin. Ron, Harry knew, hadn't fully gotten over her death. Harry, on the other hand, had simply repressed his emotions with a combination of Occlumency and bitter experience. There would be plenty of time for grieving once it was all over.

Harry whipped out his wand on arrival, scanning the area for traps with senses honed by years on the run. The wrecked street passed his inspection and he motioned for his partner to follow him. The pair swiftly took cover behind a burned-out car and took stock of the situation. They were in the former suburb on a horcrux raid – what would hopefully be the final one. The diary, the cup, the locket, ring and the snake had all been accounted for over the years, destroyed in the face of their unrelenting determination.

All that remained was Godric Gryffindor's ancient wand, which was rumoured to be hidden in this unassuming corner of London. The significance to the place, however, was clear to all present; they were standing near the site of Lord Voldemort's former orphanage, which was no longer standing. Harry thought it might be buried underneath, in a basement or something similar, and he and Ron were there to find out.

Finally sure that the street was devoid of traps, Harry indicated that Ron should search the buildings on the left side of the road, while he checked the right. The pair soundlessly peeled off and entered opposite buildings; Ron's a former corner-shop, Harry's what had once been a terraced house. Both were deserted, so the pair moved onto the next ones in perfect sync. When there were two buildings left to check on either side, Harry noticed spellfire coming from Ron's building. With a curse he sprinted across the cracked road and burst through the derelict front door of the semi-detached. He briefly took in a dirty hallway, paint cracked and peeling with age, when he found Ron standing over a stunned Death Eater, wand pointed at the masked man's heart. Harry sagged with relief. He didn't think he could handle losing Ron so soon after Hermione.

"What are you waiting for? Finish the job and let's get a damned move on," he spat, not wanting to delay in a place which was obviously under surveillance. Ron looked at him with a calm expression on his lined face, his eyes oddly glassy, as if distracted.

"We shouldn't be so hasty. This scum," Ron said while aiming a kick at the Death Eater's side, "could tell us some valuable information. I say we let him live for now and Portkey him back to base when we're done."

"Your call. I just think we shouldn't linger, is all," replied Harry. He strode out of the empty house and back onto the darkened street, a scowl on his disfigured face. Ron followed shortly after, wand gripped tightly in his hand. The pair walked, side by side, down the scorched pavement until they reached the end of the road, where the imposing orphanage had once been. Now all that remained was a square of blackened earth, the building having been literally removed from existence by an angry Voldemort. Harry and Ron stood staring at the dirt, unmoving, as if deciding where to start.

"Ron, can I ask you something?" Harry began, his expression pensive.

"Sure mate, unless it's where to start looking for this horcrux, because I don't have a damned clue," replied Ron, shaking his head in frustration.

“Do you miss her? Hermione I mean. I’ve been thinking –“

“Shut. Up.” growled Ron, with uncharacteristic anger. “Don’t mention her. I’m not ready for that kind of conversation just yet, alright? We’re in the middle of searching for a bloody Horcrux, mate. Maybe when this is all over, yeah? We haven’t had much time to talk about things like that, and I know how you must feel, but I just need focus on the task in hand.” He said while staring at the ground, his voice beginning to soften. He sighed, “I do miss her, of course I do. I just don’t think you know how much, mate. Now lets just get to work on this horcrux and we can take that hurdle when we get to it, O.K?”

Harry stole a glance at his friend and was shocked to see tears in the young man’s eyes. Harry had seen Ron, in werewolf form, slaughter an entire group of Death Eaters for daring to look at him. To see him like this was disconcerting, even to Harry. He moved an arm to comfort Ron, when all hell began to break loose.

Apparition cracks sounded like gunshots throughout the previously-quiet landscape. Over two dozen masked and hooded figures appeared up and down the road, wands out and at the ready, looking for the enemy. Harry and Ron whirled around, the emotional moment over, and immediately began to fight the attackers with feral ferocity. The Death Eaters were at a disadvantage, being disorientated and dispersed after the Apparition, so the initial fighting was firmly in the defender’s favour. Reductor curses, Cutting hexes and Bone-breaking jinxes rocketed from the ends of their wands, causing casualties almost every spell. Bits of heated masonry and shattered stone erupted from the tarmac as stray spells hit the ground, slicing into unprotected flesh with ease. Harry un-holstered his pistol and began to fire at the packs of Death Eaters, scoring a hit with every shot. The pistol was so effective, despite being non-magical, due to the element of surprise it offered and nature of its ammunition. Bullets travelled far faster than hexes and consequently pierced magical shielding far easier. Harry had noticed this fact at an early stage in the war and had quickly adopted the use of firearms. He hadn’t regretted it yet. Ron wasn’t as proficient with Muggle weaponry, so he stuck to his wand, instead learning a wider variety of spells than Harry to compensate.

The Death Eaters began to fight back at this point, their curses impacting on the pair's shields. They retreated down the road and dived as one behind a low wall which surrounded the remains of a garden. Harry holstered the gun and steadied his wand, ready to renew the assault. He turned to Ron, his eyes lit up with bloodlust.

"Well this is a real way to spend your evening! Who'd bother with reading a book or listening to the wireless when you could be duelling for your life for the third time in a week? This is living!" he quipped with a grin, blindly returning fire over the flimsy bricks that made up their fortification. Ron just looked at him blankly, which slightly unnerved Harry. He had seen that look before, on the victims of the Imperius...

Realisation flashed through his mind, a fraction of a second too late. Ron raised his wand and shot a Petrificus Totalus at Harry's exposed chest, the power of the spell bypassing his shirt's defensive wards. Harry froze in mid-curse, a shocked look on his face, his mouth half-open stupidly. Death Eaters, emboldened by the lack of retaliation to their curses, began to approach the garden where the two were hidden. Harry fell onto his back, his arm outstretched, unable to move as the first masked heads poked over the wall. Ron just crouched there passively, his expression still blank.

The first Death Eater to appear was the one Ron had stunned in the house; Harry recognised the build. He stepped over the wall into the muddy garden and aimed a kick at Harry's frozen ribs. "Take that Potter. Not so smart now are you, you little prick? Didn't suspect your friend for a second. I'm glad I told him to fight my colleagues, although I don't know if a half-blood scumbag like you would have noticed anyway," he snarled, punctuating his tirade with repeated kicks to the side. Harry felt every one, mentally crying out in pain. Once the Death Eater was finished he motioned for his fellows to grab Harry and carry him into the middle of the road. Harry noted with satisfaction that there was a small pile of bodies and body parts further down the street, evidence that they had inflicted some damage. Ron followed the group meekly, his wand in the hands of the previously-stunned Death Eater.

“Now, Potter, I’m going to summon the Dark Lord. And I don’t think he’ll be happy to see you. I was ordered to stand guard here on his express permission, and it looks like I succeeded in my duty. I will be rewarded! And you, you worthless rebel, will get what you deserve. And I hope it’s slow and painful!” the man cried, motioning for Ron to stand to attention next to him. He rolled up the sleeves of his black robes and pressed the raw Mark on his forearm, hissing in pain as it turned jet black. Then, with a smile that could be seen underneath his mask, he stood back with the dozen remaining followers to await the arrival of Voldemort.

Harry wasn’t really paying attention to all this; he was more preoccupied with trying to break free of Ron’s spell. The problem was that Ron was a powerful wizard, and a wandless-soundless spell was notoriously difficult to pull off in the best of circumstances. Harry was in pain and shock, and for all his efforts he could only remove the spell from the fingers of his left hand, which were currently pinned to the pocket of his trousers. As he tried to focus on freeing the entire hand, he was distracted somewhat by the arrival of his nemesis.

Absolute power had treated Voldemort well. In the Fall of Hogwarts he had sustained significant magical trauma, losing the use of his legs and being forced into a three-day coma. But he had had five years to recover from old injuries, and magic allowed him to move much faster than normal legs, while maintaining the semblance of walking. Today he was dressed in what seemed to be an ordinary black cloak, but was in fact much more. The cloak had the rare property of absorbing light as well as most spells, giving Voldemort the semblance of being swathed in darkness, with only his piercing red eyes showing from beneath the hood. The effect was very imposing, something which Harry reckoned the man relished.

When he saw Harry lying helpless in the dirt, he threw back his hooded head and laughed for a full minute, with no one else daring to make a noise. The laughter sounded wrong coming from his mouth, like a perverse imitation of real humour. Then he stopped abruptly and began to speak in his smooth, condescending tones, as if nothing had happened.

“Oh dear, Mr. Potter, we do seem to have got ourselves into a sticky situation, haven’t we? Petrified by your own friend and helpless at the hands of your enemy. I don’t envy you at all,” he turned to the huddle of Death Eaters behind him and snapped in a much colder tone, “Give me his wand. Now.”

The man who had Imperioused Ron stood forward and handed over Harry’s holly wand with a bow. Voldemort, with barely a glance at the man, turned back to Harry’s prone form and began to bend the piece of wood in from of Harry’s eyes. With deliberate slowness the wand began to bend, splinter, and finally snap in two. Voldemort allowed himself another laugh as he snapped the pieces in two again, and again. Finally he dropped them at his feet; inches from Harry’s face, and set them on fire with a flourish. Harry could only watch as his faithful tool slowly turned to ashes before his very eyes, the phoenix feather core crumbling to pieces under the heat of the magical fire. He felt something within him diminish, like losing a part of himself. Before he could come to terms with the loss, Voldemort began to speak again.

“Well, that deals with our little... problem... with duelling, doesn’t it Potter? Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to indulge in a bit of Muggle justice. Normally I wouldn’t lower myself to their disgusting levels, but I’ve heard it is extremely satisfying. One kick for every Horcrux destroyed should be poetic, don’t you agree?” the speech drew some gasps from the Death Eaters behind him as they realised simply how far their master had delved into the dark arts. Ignoring their exclamations, Voldemort raised a booted foot and brought it down on Harry’s face, again and again. Blood spurted from Harry’s nose, red and hot, as he felt it break. His teeth began to loosen as Voldemort continued to stamp on his head, five times in total. Finally the assault ceased; Harry’s face was covered in blood and he could feel multiple teeth loose or missing. Voldemort laughed again; he was doing that a lot lately.

“My my, that did feel good, Malfoy was right. Now, what do we have here?” he asked himself, gesturing to the motionless Ron, “I do believe that’s a Weasley. The last of the Weasleys, to be more precise. And a blood traitor,” he looked down at Harry’s frozen, blood-splattered face, “and we know what we do to blood traitors, don’t we

Harry?" he asked, raising his wand and aiming it at Ron. Harry screamed inwardly, not quite believing what he was seeing. He had survived countless battles, evaded Voldemort more times than he could count. He and Ron couldn't die, not in some nondescript street as night fell. It wasn't justice! Good was supposed to win, not this sadistic dictator!

Voldemort cocked his head under the dark robes, as if wondering what to do with Ron. Finally he waved the wand and summoned a large iron cross into the middle of the road, slightly bigger and wider than a man. Harry redoubled his efforts to break free of the curse, knowing what was about to happen. Ron was unresistingly levitated in front of the cross and held in place. Then several metal spikes were conjured and placed before his wrists and ankles. Voldemort paused for a moment, glancing over his shoulder.

"Montgomery, release this insufferable ape from the Imperius, I want him to feel Lord Voldemort's wrath before he expires like the animal he is."

The Death Eater who had cast the Curse in the first place cancelled it, causing Ron to blink stupidly and take in his position.

It wasn't good. Harry was petrified on the ground, and he looked like he'd been badly beaten up. The Dark Lord didn't look too happy either.

All in all there had been better days.

Voldemort smiled underneath his hood. "Well Weasley, now that you're awake, lets get on with the show!" he exclaimed with wicked glee, drawing cheers from his followers. The spikes drove into Ron's flesh with brutal force, eliciting a scream of pain and shock from the redhead. Blood spurted from the wounds onto the tarmac below, staining the dusty earth. Ron gritted his teeth and looked Voldemort in the eyes, refusing to show any more discomfort than his initial scream. Voldemort frowned at the lack of reaction and waved his wand, causing the spikes to begin to glow red-hot, making Ron to cry out in pain once more and try to tug himself free. The Death Eaters

sniggered at the man's discomfort, drawing sick pleasure from the scene.

Harry tried to block out the sounds and sights from his mind, unable to look away. His mind was simply refusing to take in what was happening, he was running on sheer adrenaline. He tried once more to break the Petrificus, but was still met with no success other than his wiggling fingers. He scrabbled at his side, managing to worm them into his pocket. Inside there was the feeling of cool metal; a chain.

Excitement flooded his body, despite the woeful situation. He had managed to get hold of his rudimentary Time-Turner; a device which would send him back a short, pre-set amount of time. He and Ron both carried one and had never had to use them before now; he was ashamed to admit he had forgotten about them. Ignoring Ron's continued yells of pain; he slowly drew the device from his pocket, bit by bit, with the intention of getting out of there and then working out what to do. By now Voldemort was growing bored of his victim's incessant screaming, and cooled the spikes once more.

"Any last words, you pathetic excuse for a pure-blood? Or are you unable to speak, struck dumb by my power?" he sneered, the darkness surrounding his form blotting out his eyes for a moment.

Ron raised his head once more, shaking slightly from the torture. "Yeah, I have a few words for you," he began in a weak voice, "Most of them are unrepeatable in polite company, I'll tell you that much. But, for now, I'll just say this: Harry will defeat you, you complete and utter wanker," he paused for a moment to spit on Voldemort's robes with a flourish, "If I were you I'd watch my back. You might have got rid of me using dirty tricks, but Harry will get out this mess and keep fighting you until one of you is dead. Be sure of it."

Voldemort wiped off Ron's saliva, his glowing eyes narrowing into slits of hate. He raised his wand once more, moving it in a jerking motion, akin to a man reeling in a fish. Ron's eyes widened and his throat began to bulge alarmingly. Finally his trachea was torn clean out of his neck, dangling down his front like a macabre rope. It

fluttered and wheezed as the colour drained from Ron's freckled face. Finally, he slumped over, lifeless.

But Voldemort had made a crucial error. In his haste to kill Ron, he had forgotten doing so would negate all spells Ron had cast, including the Petrificus affecting Harry. Harry, suddenly able to move, immediately attempted to get to his feet. He promptly collapsed again, muscles completely numb from being lain upon for so long. The pain in his nose had subsided to a dull throb, letting him think clearly. Thankfully no one had thus far noticed his movements, all the Death Eaters being enraptured by the sight of Ron's dramatic death, so he was allowed to massage his legs unobtrusively and gently wipe the crusted blood off his mouth, wincing at the spikes of agony he felt from touching the wounded area. When Voldemort turned around to deal with his enemy, Harry was already on his feet and beginning to flee down the darkened road.

Voldemort screamed in fury and began to hurl curses at his defenceless foe. The Chosen One began to dodge and jink from side to side as the Death Eaters joined the hunt, whooping with glee at the prospect of killing the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry dived to the ground as a Decapitating hex narrowly missed, and rolled off to one side as more multicoloured spells cracked the earth where he had previously lain. Ignoring the long scrapes and grazes on his knees and arms, he flipped back onto his feet and held up the Time-Turner. His attackers didn't let up in their assault, sending curses at the Time-Turner without stopping to check what it was.

Harry turned the Turner three times. The street began to dissolve.

Five curses hit the device simultaneously, causing it to crack and glow a sickly green. Pain, white hot and piercing, erupted from Harry's scar for the first time since he mastered Occlumency. He screwed up his eyes and fell to his knees, the Time-Turner clutched tightly in his hands. The street vanished, replaced with a grey mist. Harry collapsed onto his side, still grasping the Turner and scrabbling at his scar. The pain continued for what seemed like hours, but was only seconds, before stopping as soon as it had started.

Harry gasped with relief and opened his eyes. He was floating, quite naked, in a grey void. He felt his face and found his nose was no longer broken and his teeth were all accounted for. The scar on his cheek was even gone; his only blemish that seemed to be there was the lightning-bolt on his forehead. The grey mist was very thick, obscuring everything from view. Harry began to see flashes of colour in it, scenes flickering in and out of existence before his eyes.

Lupin hanging from the Whomping Willow; Hermione looking at him sadly as he was port-keyed away; Dumbledore's body silhouetted against the Dark Mark as he plummeted to his death from the Astronomy Tower; Hogwarts vanishing in a storm of fire, along with hundreds of staff and students...

Different scenes began to play, these ones unfamiliar. Harry watched, transfixed, as he saw his life play out before him, starting from his birth...

A smiling couple in front of a newly-purchased cottage; a red-haired woman cooing at a baby in her arms; a long-haired, handsome man bouncing a small infant on his knee and roaring with laughter; the Dursleys, cold and bitter, locking him in the cupboard for the first time; Ripper, Aunt Marge's dog, chasing him up a tree; Harry being chased by Dudley and his gang and ending up on the school roof; Harry having his head shaved by Aunt Petunia; Harry talking to a snake in the zoo, and somehow setting it free...

His first year at Hogwarts swiftly played out in a series of faster flashes; from Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ to his first Quidditch match to fighting past the teacher's enchantments to his confrontation with Quirrell/Voldemort in front of the Mirror of Erised. Harry began to concentrate, to slow down the images, which became clearer and more coherent. He had no idea what was happening, whether this was death or something of Voldemort's doing, but it was fascinating, seeing his life in the third person.

Harry meeting Dobby for the first time; meeting Lockhart for the first time; cheering Mr. Weasley on while he fought Lucius Malfoy in Flourish and Blotts; crashing into the Whomping Willow with Ron;

finding Mrs Norris petrified; finding Justin and Nearly-Headless Nick petrified; finding Hermione petrified; working out what was in the Chamber with her help...

Then the images froze. It showed Harry and Ron, having learned that Ginny was in the Chamber, on their way to Lockhart's office to help him fight the Basilisk. The image grew clearer, the fog around it disappearing. Slowly the colours grew sharper and brighter, beginning to blind Harry with their brilliance. Finally he had to close his eyes against the glare. When he opened him, he saw something he never thought he would see again.

A familiar, twelve year-old, redhead was standing over him with a look of concern on his face.

"You all right, Harry?"

Chapter 2 – Familiar Faces

“You all right, Harry?”

“Ron?” Harry replied weakly, trying to focus on the worried face above him.

“Harry, are you O.K.? You passed out and started shaking...”

“Ron?” was all Harry could manage. His vision instantly cleared. Ron was there, what the hell was going on?

“Harry, what-“ Ron began, only to be cut off by Harry scrabbling backwards from his prone position. He had seen him be crucified alive by Voldemort only minutes ago, yet here he was! He was immediately suspicious, yet quietly hopeful of the situation. He took a good long look at his friend and he noticed something was definitely wrong.

“Ron... how old are you?” he asked, disbelief evident in his voice.

“You must have hit your head or something... thirteen, Harry, how could you forget something like that?” was the incredulous reply. Now that he thought about it, Ron’s voice was higher than he remembered. Harry’s voice was higher than he remembered, high pitched and reedy as opposed to mature and deep. Then it hit him.

This wasn’t real. It was an illusion, a branch of magic Voldemort had begun to become proficient in. The idea had been born from a need for a secure prison system, which didn’t rely on fickle creatures such as the Dementors; the victim would be trapped inside their own mind. Using the same enchantments cast on pensieves, Voldemort would delve into the victim’s memories and extract enough information about an event to form an extraordinarily real hallucination, which would try and keep as close to the “reality” of the situation as possible. The memory generally ended after the significance of it had played out; for example if it was a replay of him getting the Philosopher’s Stone it would end with Quirrel’s death. Depending on why the magic was being used the memory could repeat or a new one would be selected. Harry thought as an interactive pensieve memory, as it

used similar spells, however you were really “there” rather than in the background.

It seemed as though Voldemort had captured him after all; the spells hitting the Time Turner must have knocked him unconscious. Ron was still dead, despite the younger version of him eying Harry warily. Harry was still doomed. He was surprised by how readily he accepted this; it was as though the inevitable had happened, he had only prolonged his defeat by running for five years... he shook himself mentally. He shouldn't think like that. Taking stock of his situation was the priority, and then deciding what to do. Despair led nowhere profitable.

Harry sat up from the ground with a sigh and looked around him. His breath caught in his throat as he realised he was in a corridor in Hogwarts.

Hogwarts. Burned to the ground at the beginning of Voldemort's reign in Harry's seventh year, along with hundreds of staff and pupils. The attack had come without warning; there had been no time to prepare. Voldemort had taken a terrible toll on his own body that day when he had finally smote the castle from the Scottish landscape, but it had been, in the Dark Lord's eyes, definitely worth it. Nearly all potential resistance was gone, in the space of ten minutes of fire and screaming. Most of the Order had been inside or around the castle fighting; it had almost been too easy for Voldemort.

Harry reluctantly wrenched himself out of the memory when he sensed 'Ron' watching him. Harry then got to his feet and dusted himself off. He was wearing regulation Hogwarts uniform and he was struck by how small he was. He was also stick thin and short, totally unlike the tall and broad body he was used to. He fingered his cheek and was unnerved by the absence of a scar or stubble. Looking at Ron's hands was also odd; he had all his fingers now, and there would be no scars like his werewolf bite to mar his body.

“Harry, do you need to visit the Hospital Wing? We can go there on the way to Lockhart's office if you want, mate,” Ron began, but Harry cut him off, saying he was fine and it was just a headache. Ron shook

his head, as if to clear water from his ears, and kept walking down the corridor.

“If you’re OK Harry, and don’t fancy hugging anymore people, hurry up! We need to help Lockhart save Ginny!” he called over his shoulder, causing Harry’s brain to whirr into action. The illusion was replaying his defeat of the Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets, something which would probably amuse Voldemort. It seemed to him like he was about to go to Lockhart’s office with Ron; Harry remembered how that adventure had turned out.

Once the hallucination was over he would probably have to endure unimaginable torture at the hands of Voldemort, then an ignoble death. He knew that if he played along with it, the illusion would eventually repeat or change. His situation did seem hopeless.

Ron was standing a short distance away, looking at Harry with an air of impatience mingled with curiosity. Harry wondered why his friend was in such a hurry, but then remembered what his friend had said about saving Ginny. Ron would stop at nothing to save his baby sister. Voldemort’s illusion was eerily accurate; this was how Ron had looked that day, if Harry remembered right. He glanced out of a window-slit set next to a beautiful tapestry. The sun was beginning to sink; even the time of day was correct. The pair of them hurried along in silence, Ron still throwing quizzical looks in Harry’s direction, obviously confused about his friend’s strange questions in the corridor.

He saw Ron stop up ahead, pausing before a heavy oak door. They could hear heavy thumps and scrapes behind the door; Lockhart was clearing out as he had all those years ago. Harry motioned for Ron to step aside, which he did with a puzzled look on his freckled face. Harry adjusted his glasses, pulled out his wand, and opened the unlocked door of the dimly-lit study.

As he had expected, Lockhart was packing up, and by the looks of it was nearly finished. All the garish posters and pictures of him were taken down, the shelves were clear and he was just finishing clearing out his desk. Lockhart looked up as they entered, flashing Harry a nervous smile.

“Harry... my fellow celebrity! Could you spare me a moment, I’m just a tad busy...” he said lamely, gesturing at the packing around him. Ron moved to pull Harry back out of the room, but he shrugged his friend off.

“I don’t think so, Gilderoy. You’re going to come with us, right now,” Harry said calmly, pointing his wand at the smiling man. He had decided to try to get things over with as quickly as possible, and try to see if he could possibly break the enchantment Voldemort had on him. Not that anyone ever had. Anything to keep his mind off of his probable torture later on.

“Harry, I don’t understand quite what you’re...”

“Stow it. You’re going to hand over your wand and you’re going to come down to the Chamber with me and Ron. We know what’s in there, and we know how to kill it.”

“Harry...” Ron began, looking extremely apprehensive, “do you know what you’re saying mate, that headache might be affecting you...”

“I know what I mean Ron, he’s a fraud. He’s taken credit for what other people have done,” Harry turned back to Lockhart, “Haven’t you!” he practically shouted, brandishing the wand close to Lockhart’s terrified face. Red sparks shot out of the end of it, causing the teacher to practically faint in terror. Faced with someone who was intent on doing him harm, Lockhart was a far cry from his picture-perfect public image. Harry was wishing the fool would move a bit faster, but he gained no little satisfaction from making the man cower, even if it was an illusion.

“It’s true! It’s all true!” Lockhart wailed, gingerly pulling out his own wand and throwing it pathetically onto the empty desk between them. “I’m sorry, Dumbledore offered me the job on faith, I don’t really know anything...”

Harry opened his mouth to order Lockhart to follow him, when Ron interrupted him with a spell.

“Expelliarmus!” Ron yelled, pointing his badly repaired wand at Lockhart’s chest. The wand emitted a shower of white sparks and steam, but also threw Lockhart across the room with brutal force. Ron was breathing heavily, anger evident in his face. Lockhart slammed into the back wall with a curse, landing on the floor in an undignified heap, looking dazed. Harry stared at Ron, surprised at how much power the boy’s emotions had fed into the misfired spell, and at how much power the illusion had to deviate like that.

“Serves you right, you useless, ungrateful git. And to think I thought you could save Ginny...” Ron muttered, seizing Lockhart’s wand and leaving the room without another word. Harry looked after him, open mouthed.

That hadn’t happened the first time. Harry had been truly unaware of the depth of Ron’s worry about Ginny; he’d been too intent on playing with the illusion of Lockhart. Looking at the aforementioned man with a frown on his face, Harry followed Ron’s example and left the room, locking the door as he went. Lockhart wouldn’t be playing a part in this adventure.

He swiftly caught up with Ron again, giving him a curt nod to show his approval. Ron looked as though he couldn’t speak; his face was contorted with anger at the betrayal. Passing the shining messages daubed onto the wall, they quickly found themselves standing in Myrtle’s dingy bathroom. Ron was still breathing as though he had run a marathon; he didn’t look ready for speech. Myrtle herself was sitting in a sink, looking characteristically miserable, although she brightened up considerably at the sight of Harry, causing the boy to mentally retch - even as a magically induced spectre she was hideous.

“Hi, Harry,” she said with a wave, “what do you want?” Ron opened his mouth, having recovered enough to speak, but Harry cut him off again with a wave of his hand. Ron looked indignant, but nevertheless allowed Harry to talk.

“Myrtle, we’re going to go into the Chamber of Secrets. It’s in this bathroom. You were killed by the Basilisk inside. Don’t tell anyone, on pain of... well I’ll get you in trouble.” His speech was short and to the

point, the words of someone in control of the situation, which shut Myrtle and Ron up immediately. Harry crossed the bathroom to the wall of cracked sinks, intent on locating the tap with a snake on. Finding it, he beckoned a stunned Ron over.

"There. That tap; see the snake on the side? I'm going to speak in Parseltounge, which will open the door."

"How do you know all this?" asked Ron, looking at his friend incredulously. Harry laughed softly at the accuracy of the illusion.

"Just trust me," he replied with a determined scowl as he stared at the tap. The next words Harry spoke were in Parseltounge; a hissing, strangled noise. The tap glowed with blinding light and spun, as it had done in his second year, and the entire sink slowly moved out of sight to reveal a cavernous pipe. Ron gulped at the spectacle, whereas Harry just looked bored. He had seen all this before; he just wanted to have his rematch with Riddle so he could see if there was an escape to his mental prison.

"Go ahead, unless you want me to take the lead?" he asked Ron with a small smile. Ron looked positively terrified, but he jumped into the chute without the need for further encouragement. Harry followed suit, trying to enjoy the twisting journey into the depths of the school. He landed gracefully on his feet at the end of the pipe, in stark contrast to Ron, who was sprawled on the tunnel floor. The passageway to the chamber was unlike the Hogwarts corridors, dank and damp, whereas the ones above were warm and dry. Harry paused to haul Ron to his feet and dust him off, and then set off down the tunnel, lighting his wand as he went.

The pair continued in terse silence for a number of minutes, skirting a massive piece of shed snake-skin, until they reached the ornate doorway into the Chamber. Harry had spent the journey debating whether to let Ron come with him; Riddle and the Basilisk could still hurt him if he was careless, and having a friend that Harry had just seen murdered didn't seem like the best plan for ensuing concentration.

"Ron, I need you to stay here. I think I should do this alone."

“Harry, no way. Ginny is my sister too!” Ron exclaimed, his ears tinged red. Harry rolled his eyes and took the simpler option of stunning Ron, catching him and laying him gently on the ground next to the door. As an afterthought he cast some cushioning charms along Ron’s head and back, as the illusion was too like his late friend to let him simply leave him like that. Satisfied that Ron was sleeping comfortably, Harry turned to face the doors.

They, too, were just as he remembered. Massive intertwined serpents set into the rock-face, camouflaging the thick gates into the Chamber. Harry pulled his wand from his robes and spoke the Parseltounge to open them.

Time to see an old friend... he thought maliciously as the gates rumbled open, prepared to wreak havoc on the visions Voldemort was sending him. The Chamber itself was wreathed in darkness, but that didn’t faze Harry. He strode between the pillars, as confident as he could be in his scrawny body. The base of Salazar’s egotistically huge statue rapidly came into view, with Ginny lying at its ornately-carved feet.

Ginny. She had burned in Hogwarts, along with nearly all his school friends and teachers. He could still see Hogwarts on fire when he closed his eyes; the rain that had poured down that day doing nothing to put out the magical flames; silhouettes of people against the windows, screaming and running...

He shook himself slightly, focusing on the task in hand. Ginny was there, the diary horcrux was next to her... Riddle would no doubt materialise and try to taunt him as he approached. Harry formulated a plan of attack in his mind; insult Riddle a bit, summon Fawkes, get Gryffindor’s sword and then kill the Basilisk in as flashy a way as he could. And then wake up face the fury and torture of the most powerful Dark Lord in history.

Piece of cake, really.

Keeping his plan at the forefront of his mind, Harry walked up to the base of the statue, sparing a glance to see if Ginny was OK. She

actually looked better than he remembered, a product of him and Ron getting to the Chamber quicker this time round. His eyes flicked around him, always moving. He hadn't had any problems the first time he had been in the Chamber, but he couldn't trust this particular illusion Voldemort was casting.

"She won't wake," said a soft voice behind him. Harry calmly turned and addressed its owner.

"Riddle. I know that you're a Horcrux so dispense with the pleasantries, don't try to steal my wand and get on with summoning your familiar. I don't have time for games."

The ghostly form of Tom Riddle, who was standing a short distance from Harry, blinked in surprise. Harry had just rattled off a string of information he thought was secret, from his name to his nature as a horcrux, and had pre-empted his idea to take the boys wand when he was distracted. It seemed he had been wrong-footed somewhere along the line.

"Well, Harry, it seems you're very confident. Virtually unarmed and alone, hoping to pit yourself against Slytherin's heir? Do you even know who I really am?" Riddle blustered, trying to regain some dignity. Harry gave him a withering look and raised his wand arm, pointing it at the ceiling.

"Try not to embarrass yourself further, Voldemort." He looked at the Chamber's dark ceiling, completely ignoring Riddle. "Fawkes! I need you! I need Dumbledore's help!" he cried, praying the phoenix would come. Harry was strong, but it was always good to have help. He knew that Fawkes would come only if someone would have loyalty to Dumbledore; if fighting for the old man's cause essentially alone wasn't loyalty, Harry didn't know what was. Harry wasn't entirely sure if he would die in reality if he died in the vision he was experiencing, so he wanted to take no chances.

As if on cue, Fawkes burst into the Chamber in a flash of fire, the Sorting Hat clutched in his steely talons. He let loose an uplifting snatch of song and swooped down onto Harry's shoulder. Harry promptly seized the Hat from Fawkes, jamming it onto his head.

“Ah, Mister Potter... wait... what is this...you aren’t the same child... Hogwarts burning? Voldemort? What is this?” the Hat’s normally sly voice cried, in genuine distress. Harry was puzzled by its outburst, it should have acted normally in the illusion Voldemort had placed upon him, but put it out of his mind when the sword of Gryffindor promptly cracked onto his head, making him see stars. Wincing and rubbing his crown, he withdrew the sword from the hat and, tossing the tattered headwear aside, turned to face a stunned Riddle.

“So... a sword and a bird. Dumbledore really does try to look after his own, doesn’t he Potter. Don’t you know that Slytherin’s monster can kill you with but a glance?” the spectre mocked, obviously perturbed by Harry’s knowledge and confidence.

“Just summon the Basilisk, Riddle. I don’t have time for games.” Harry strode past the shocked phantom and turned to face Slytherin’s statue. When no summoning was forthcoming, Harry decided to try it himself.

He spoke the ancient summoning: “Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four.”

As he had hoped, the mouth of Slytherin’s grotesque monkey-like face began to open; the Basilisk began to stir within its depths. Harry moved to the base of the statue, next to Ginny’s prone form, and raised his wand on impulse, pointing it at the entrance, the sword of Gryffindor clenched tightly in his other hand.

The Basilisk poked its head out, eyes closed against the bright torchlight of the Chamber.

“Confringo!” Harry yelled, falling back towards a pillar as Fawkes streaked towards the Basilisk. The snake was struck on the head by the Blasting curse, sending it spiralling out of the statue to hit the Chamber floor with a muffled thud. Harry stood behind the pillar he had chosen, breathing heavily. Then he heard the sound he had wanted to hear – Fawkes screeching and the Basilisk hissing and spitting in rage. He risked a peek round the side of his cover to see

the colossal beast on the floor to the right of the statue and Ginny, writhing in pain and blinking over ruined eye sockets.

“You can still smell him! Hunt him down!” Riddle hissed in Parseltounge. The Basilisk paused, as Harry strode confidently out from behind the pillar, sword in one hand, wand in the other, both raised and ready to fight.

“Come on then,” he said calmly to the Basilisk. The creature started and turned towards Harry. Harry raised his wand and paused. The Basilisk opened its mouth to screech its displeasure, and then Harry struck.

“Telum Conicio!” he yelled, rolling to the side as the Basilisk began to move rapidly towards him. A grey mass of energy burst forth from his wand and solidified into a iron spike, which shot into the Basilisk’s mouth and clean out the other side. The ancient beast paused for a moment, a fist-sized hole in the base of its skull, before continuing its assault. Harry gulped and ran back through the Chamber, ducking to the side behind another pillar. The Basilisk paused for a second, listening to hurried orders from Riddle, before continuing to search for Harry.

Harry waited for as long as he dared before whirling out from the side of his pillar to see the tail of the beast at his feet. He gripped Gryffindor’s sword with his left hand and brought it down onto the snake’s tail, hacking at the skin repeatedly. The Basilisk turned from where it was searching in an instant, its fangs bared and ready to strike. Harry flicked his wand and shouted a banishing charm, putting as much of his energy into it as he could given his panic. The creature’s head flicked to the side and slammed into a column, its mouth open in pain. Harry saw his opening, and decided to end it as quickly as he could.

“Telum Conicio!” he yelled again, pointing into the creature’s mouth. The grey light shot from his wand and solidified again, before slamming and ricocheting off of one of the Basilisk’s fangs, which was slick with blood. The spike penetrated the roof of its mouth, embedding itself deep into the monster’s brain. The creature spasmed, shuddered, and began to convulse slightly, twitching with

small movements all along its body. Harry banished it in front of the statue to show Riddle, who was red with rage.

Then he saw, to his discomfort, that the fang which had been hit had cracked and had started to glow slightly after being hit by the spell he had used. Harry heard a high pitched whine begin to grow in his ear, as the Basilisk's fangs began to glow brighter.

"You fool! You mixed two highly potent magics!" Riddle yelled over the whining noise. Harry swore under his breath and cast the strongest banishing spell he knew with as much power as he could, sending the Basilisk rocketing upwards towards the mouth of Slytherin's statue, the fangs still glowing with an unearthly light.

Time seemed to slow as Harry muttered another incantation straight after the first, throwing up a high-level shield around himself and Ginny, to protect from whatever was about to happen.

The effect was spectacular. The entire head of Slytherin's statue was eradicated from existence, the Basilisk blown apart under the incredible magical discharge of the Killing Curse and Basilisk venom. Riddle had begun to scream as soon as Harry uttered the words, knowing what was coming, but he was drowned out by the explosion and the subsequent sound of the debris hitting the stone floor. Harry grunted as the shield took hits from falling rocks and bits of Basilisk, exerting more effort to keep the silver barrier active. The ancient foundations of Hogwarts seemed to shake in complaint against the reaction's sheer strength. The noise was incredible, even through the shield.

After what seemed like an eternity, the dust cleared. Slytherin's statue had been beheaded, and there was no longer a Basilisk inhabiting it. The Chamber itself was covered in loose rocks, blood and dust, like a fine layer of sand. Several of the snake-engraved pillars were cracked and pitted; they didn't look like they would survive another impact of any strength. Ginny and Harry, conversely, were completely fine, standing and lying respectively in a little circle of clean stone where the shield had protected them. Fawkes and the Sorting hat hadn't moved outside Harry's shield during the spell's casting, although the phoenix was giving Harry a very piercing stare,

as if trying to work something out. Bizarrely the bird was completely unperturbed by the level of destruction Harry had wreaked, but he knew so little of phoenixes he paid this no thought.

He took a deep breath and knelt down to check Ginny, ignoring Fawkes' protests at the movement. She still hadn't woken up, which meant that the diary had survived the explosion, even if Riddle had seemingly vanished. Harry scanned the room with a practiced eye, and soon picked it out, lying innocuously beside a pillar in the middle of the wrecked room. He instructed Fawkes to stay with Ginny and retrieved the book, placing it on the floor in front of him in the middle of the Chamber. He knew once it was destroyed the vision would end, and he would have to face the Dark Lord's wrath, or another scenario.

Without a further thought, he grabbed a sharp looking rock and dipped it in as much Basilisk blood and venom as he could gather from the surrounding area. Then he stabbed the diary, echoing his actions from the first time he'd been to the Chamber. Like the first time, it screamed and blackened at the edges, becoming just a normal diary. Harry then dropped Gryffindor's sword and screwed up his eyes, preparing to wake up.

Surprisingly, he didn't. Harry opened his eyes again, feeling faintly stupid standing there with his skinny arms outstretched. Fawkes trilled gently behind him, telling him that Ginny had awoken. Harry had no idea what was happening; he was beginning to suspect this wasn't an illusion spell, but he had no idea what it was in that case. Ginny had begun to stir at the base of the statue. He left Gryffindor's sword lying in the dust and sprinted over to his friend as she opened her eyes with a groan.

Ginny blinked blearily, trying to work out where she was. Upon seeing Harry, she burst into tears, even though he was unblemished. Harry knelt and quickly hugged her, remembering how guilty she had felt the first time he had rescued her, and wanting to reassure her of his wellbeing.

"Harry... Harry it was me – I tried to tell you earlier but Percy... he possessed me Harry... the diary... what's happened here? Why is everything covered in dust? What happened to that statue? Where's

Riddle? Where's Ron?" Harry didn't know what he preferred, the questions or the crying. With a quick squeeze he broke off the hug and surveyed the girl in front of him. Her freckled face was red from crying, and her shiny red hair hung in front of her eyes like a curtain. He was struck how young she looked, as he had with Ron. The Ginny he had known stood tall and strong, full of attitude and laughter. This one just looked lonely. Emotions welled up inside him. He crushed them without prejudice, needing to keep in control of the situation and think clearly.

He didn't say anything, instead pulling her to her feet and checking her over. Ginny stopped her questions at that point and went very still, her sobs beginning to fade.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked finally, scanning the Chamber for any remaining danger.

"I... I think I'm fine... oh god I'm in so much trouble, aren't I?" she began to sob again, quickly getting Harry's arm wet. He put his arm around Ginny's shoulder with a smile, desperate to stop her crying. Ginny went very red and silent at this and refused to look him in the eye; he remembered her crush on him and congratulated himself on his quick thinking. Anything to stop her crying.

"Let's just go get Ron, I'm afraid I had to stun him outside, he was too hysterical to come with me," Harry lied. He still had no idea what was going on, but was determined to act normal before he could talk to Dumbledore about what was happening to him, as it didn't seem to be an illusion. If this was somehow real, and the Time Turner had malfunctioned, then he would have a lot of questions to ask the headmaster. The pair walked slowly out of the chamber, Harry's arm around Ginny's shoulder. Harry collected the remains of the horcrux, the sorting hat and Gryffindor's sword as they went. Ginny went very wide-eyed at the sight of the sword, but still seemed unable to speak after Harry had put his arm around her. Fawkes floated gently overhead, singing softly.

Ron was still lying peacefully by the entrance to the chamber, the cushioning charms keeping him from touching the hard tunnel floor.

Ginny, again, went wide-eyed at the sight of her sleeping brother but was placated when Harry revived him. Ron, however, wasn't as cooperative.

As soon as he awoke he began to let off a string of insults at Harry, trying to grab the bottom of his robes from the floor. The majority of the curses were about going after Ginny alone and knocking him out, and the irony of his reaction to Harry's swearing earlier wasn't lost on Harry himself. Ron's imaginative tirade was cut off at the sight of his sister, who was looking horrified at the variety and range of Ron's profanities.

"G-Ginny?" exclaimed Ron, scrambling to his feet and using Harry for support. "Ginny? I don't believe it! Harry saved you!" he yelled, his anger at Harry completely forgotten. He grabbed Ginny in a tight embrace, missing the pair of them holding hands. Ginny remained mute, but returned Ron's hug. Harry looked away from the reunion, feeling embarrassed and also unable to look at Ron. He still didn't know what was going on with the Time Turner, and was trying to keep a handle his emotions until it was all sorted out. He had seen that happy face, just a bit older-looking, be tortured to death before his eyes. Now he suspected that this bizarre situation might be real, talking to his friend seemed impossible. What was he going to say to someone he had seen die in front of his eyes?

It's not like I haven't had to put up with loss before, Harry thought bitterly, stalking off down the dark tunnel and leaving the Weasleys behind. He idly kicked a rock, ricocheting off of the tunnel wall and causing some gravel fall from the roof into his hair. Ron called for him to wait, and an alarming rumbling noise caused him to pause and look back at them, still deep in his angry thoughts.

He was so preoccupied that he didn't even feel it when the roof of the unstable tunnel collapsed on top of him, burying him in a roar of rock and dirt.

Chapter 3 – A lot of explaining

Pain in his head, legs, back... Ginny's screams as she and Ron clawed at the debris covering him... Ron's curses as he surveyed the damage... opening his eyes...

Harry opened his eyes slowly, squinting against the harsh glare of Ginny's lit wand. He was lying on the rough earthen floor of the tunnel, with the wreckage of the cave in scant feet away. It seemed that Ron and Ginny, who were trying to see if he was still alive, had dug him out and pulled him away from the bulk of the wreckage. He moaned slightly, letting them know he was awake. A storm of frantic questions erupted, "Harry! Are you OK?"

"Are you hurt?"

"Where does it hurt?"

"I thought you were dead!"

He remained silent, closing his eyes and mentally assessing the damage. His right leg was in crippling pain, obviously broken or lacerated. His back pains had receded to a dull throb, and his left leg was apparently just bruised. His first priority was healing the injured leg.

"Ron..." he whispered, not opening his eyes, "where's my wand? I need my wand..."

"Here, Harry, take it," Ginny squeaked as she handed him his wand, horrified that Harry was injured. Harry felt the woody texture of his wand press into his palm, and sighed with relief. He had been terrified that it had broken or been lost in the rock-fall. Eyes still screwed shut, he managed to wave it in the general direction of his leg and cast a general healing spell, something which would fix a broad spectrum of injuries while taking a lot of effort to cast.

He felt a sudden lethargy overcome him, while the pain in his leg receded. Ron and Ginny gasped as the damage repaired itself before their eyes. Harry's head cleared, he felt invigorated with the pain in

his leg gone, and the tiredness from performing the healing replaced with relief that he was alright. He opened his eyes fully, seeing the redheads looking down at him with expressions of concern, their shock at his healing spell forgotten.

“A little help?” he hissed, his back still aching. Ron gently lifted him to his feet and supported his weight while Harry adjusted to his surroundings. The dingy tunnel had caved in completely, blocking their way. The entrance to the Chamber lay shut behind them, the carved snakes seemed to be smirking at him. The sword of Gryffindor lay in the rubble, its hilt poking out between two broken rocks. Fawkes was hovering overhead, clutching the Sorting Hat and the remains of the horcrux. At the sight of Harry, the phoenix dropped his cargo and swooped down to land on his shoulder, singing a mournful melody.

The phoenix song strengthened the three of them, letting them get to grips with the situation. Harry felt his head clear and fill with the pure notes of the phoenix, soothing his confusion over the situation and filling him with the will to continue, while leaving him oddly sad when it ended. They needed to get out from below the school, but only Harry and Ginny had working wands and neither had the power to move the rocks blocking the entrance, Ginny because she was too young and Harry because he was still injured.

Ron made sure Harry could stand on his own and strode over to the blockage. “Harry, I really don’t think we can move this by hand, the whole tunnel might cave in. I reckon we’re trapped down here. What are we going to do?” his voice had a tinge of desperation to it, something which jolted Harry back into action. He was supposed to be good in a crisis.

Harry, ignoring his back pain and suppressing his emotions, tried to think rationally. He started by casting a quick cleaning charm on himself and his friends, to clean off the dust. Ginny just stood by the entrance to the Chamber, using the wall to hold her up. Harry absent-mindedly stroked Fawkes, who began to try and get his attention. He looked quizzically at the phoenix, but then had an idea.

“Ron, Ginny, could you grab the sword and the diary and come over here? Fawkes is onto something.” His friends obliged and stood next to him, hopeful expressions on their faces. “Phoenixes are very magical, and have many abilities,” he began, stooping to retrieve the Sorting Hat, “They can teleport people or objects through magical wards. He can just shift us back into the school!” Harry concluded with a gleam in his eyes. Ron looked doubtful, and Ginny looked scared, but they both nodded slowly when Harry grasped Fawkes’ tail feathers. When the three of them were all secured, Harry whispered to Fawkes, “get us to McGonagall's office, Fawkes.”

With that, the phoenix and his cargo disappeared in a flash of fire, leaving the dark, ruined tunnel behind.

Professor McGonagall’s office was filled with people when the trio landed in their midst. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape, along with Arthur and Molly Weasley, were seated and deep in conversation when Ron, Harry and Ginny landed unceremoniously in a heap and a flash by their chairs. The professors rose to their feet, wands drawn, while the Weasleys clung to each other, until Harry managed to extricate himself from the others and get up, holding out his arms in a symbol of peace. Fawkes fluttered over to Dumbledore and landed on his shoulder as Harry tried to calm down the staff members.

“Professors, wait!” he said as he got to his feet. Dumbledore lowered his wand with a twinkle in his blue eyes, giving Fawkes a knowing nod, and Snape and McGonagall followed his lead. “Ron and I saved Ginny,” he said once he was standing.

Snape gave Harry a very calculating look, but didn’t speak. The professors sat back down as Ginny and Ron got up, clutching the diary and sword respectively. Arthur and Molly cried out at the sight of Ginny, and quickly hugged the three children fiercely before fetching chairs for them. Harry looked around as he sat down and saw that the room had been transfigured into a small conference area for the meeting, with the polished desk and shelves moved to make way for a circle of uncomfortable-looking chairs.

“Well, I believe there is quite the tale to tell,” began Dumbledore amicably. “But first, I must ask Mr. Weasley where he got that magnificent sword. Could I have a look at it?” he asked, his eye-twinkle reaching blinding levels. Ron gulped at the sudden interest in him and carefully passed the headmaster the sword. Dumbledore gave it a cursory glance, noting the name inscribed on the hilt, cleared his throat, and then placed the blade on the floor in front of him. He opened his mouth to continue, but Harry cut him off. He was beginning to panic slightly. The illusion should have ended ages ago; something was definitely amiss. He just needed some final proof.

“Professor, I’m sorry to interrupt but I must confirm something.” The urgency in his voice caused Dumbledore to accept the interruption, although the rest of the group looked scandalised at his audacity. “Professor Dumbledore,” he said, “Tell me something about yourself that I am certain to not know. Your mothers name, where you grew up, anything.”

McGonagall looked at Harry sternly, but Dumbledore merely smiled.

“Harry, of course I can answer your question. My mother’s name was Kendra-“ he stopped speaking in surprise as Harry went very pale and slumped back in his seat.

I didn’t know that, he thought to himself, therefore this isn’t an illusion spell; it can only work within the boundaries of my memory. This is... real...

The time turner.

The grey mist.

This is real...

He continued to stare straight ahead, at the stone wall behind McGonagall. She looked worried at his reaction, even waving a hand in front of his eyes. Snape, who had thus far done nothing but sneer, voiced his opinion on Harry’s condition.

“Potter is in shock, Deputy Headmistress. Evidently his silly little game has had some sort of effect on him. Allow me,” he drawled, getting up lazily and crossing the room to get to Harry. Ron and Ginny, sitting either side, were looking very apprehensive about allowing Snape to get anywhere near Harry, but were prevented by the adults sharp looks from doing anything. Snape pulled a vial of vibrant red liquid from his pocket and persuaded Harry to drink it. As soon as the Calming Draught was down his throat he began to breathe deeply, and then sank into unconsciousness.

[illegible]

Harry awoke to a bright white light piercing his eyelids. Bugger, he thought, were we captured by Voldemort or something?

Memories flooded into his mind, and he sat bolt upright and opened his eyes. He was in the hospital wing, which was totally deserted. He scrabbled for his wand and glasses, before pausing as he put his glasses on. It felt odd to use them – he had gone for eye correction in his seventh year, before the war went against the Order. As he mused and tried to remember what had happened, Dumbledore swept into the infirmary, looking jovial.

“Harry, I trust you’re feeling better?”

Harry slumped in his bed and stared at Dumbledore with an oddly pensive expression.

“Headmaster?” he asked in wonder, as if seeing the headmaster for the first time. “You’re not dead?”

“No Harry, I’m in perfect health, thank you for asking,” replied the headmaster, talking as if to a small child. “Now could you please enlighten us as to what is going on? Mr and Mrs. Weasley wanted to know how you saved their daughter, and why you think that I should be dead. You’ve only been unconscious for thirty minutes or so.”

Harry looked at the Headmaster again, running through his options as fast as he could think. He needed to tell someone; he couldn't tell

anyone; the Headmaster could be trusted; the Headmaster was manipulative. He thought for a while – Dumbledore was waiting patiently – before coming to a decision.

“Sir, I’d be happy to tell Mr and Mrs Weasley how Ginny was rescued, but first I need to speak with you urgently about something, something which I don’t think the anyone else need to know just now.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows, before casting a quick silencing charm and checking Madam Pomfrey was in her office. “What is it you have to tell me, Harry?”

“Sir, do you have the Diary that Ginny was using?” Dumbledore pulled the Diary out of one of his pockets and handed it over.

“Lucius Malfoy came in shortly after you and the Weasleys left. He tried to take the diary, but dropped his watch in the process. His House Elf caught it, and freed itself, so his anger rather backfired on him I fear. Can you tell me anything about this diary?”

Harry took a deep breath. “I’ll tell you this,” he motioned at the ruined Diary, “This, sir, is the diary which bewitched Ginny Weasley. A spectre of sorts, calling itself Tom Marvolo Riddle, appeared in the Chamber and tried to kill me. This diary is not a diary. It is a Horcrux.”

The reaction following his claims was as he had expected. Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed slightly, and a dark anger seemed to appear in him. Harry ignored this and continued. “I also know Tom Riddle is none other than Lord Voldemort,” Dumbledore’s mouth lost its smile, “and this is not his only Horcrux.” Dumbledore’s eyebrows raised dramatically, and Harry gained no small satisfaction from seeing Albus Dumbledore truly stunned.

The headmaster, however, recovered quickly, in typical fashion. “Harry, I assume you know exactly what you are insinuating. You have just displayed knowledge of the Darkest of Dark artefacts, said secrets which I thought only me and Severus knew, and then claimed Riddle has made more than one Horcrux? Who are you really?” Dumbledore looked increasingly suspicious with each word, and had

begun to tense up. Harry knew he had to talk fast before the Headmaster attacked him, thinking he was possessed by Voldemort or something equally ridiculous.

“Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, I assure you I am telling the truth. I just need you to suspend your suspicions for a moment, and listen to me. I’m either having some sort of drug induced hallucination, or I’ve time travelled. I’m from the future, if you can believe it, where Voldemort won the second war. I had been captured, when I tried to escape using a Time-Turner. Voldemort and his Death Eaters fired curses at me, several of which hit the device. I woke up here. Ron can tell you I had something like a fit and then began acting strangely. I have no idea what’s going on, your guess is as good as mine. All I know is that I’m here now, or in some dungeon being pumped full of Veritaserum.”

Total silence followed his speech, the tension was palpable. Dumbledore stared at Harry in total confusion.

“Well, Harry, it seems we have a problem. I can tell you now that I’m sure this is real, but I have another problem. You claim you’re from the future, and you spout off all this knowledge, but how am I supposed to know you aren’t a Death Eater or similar malevolent force in league with Voldemort? The Harry I know acts nothing like you.”

Harry began to get increasingly desperate, until he looked at Dumbledore’s eyes and had a brainwave. “Sir, use Legilimency.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows again and shifted from his position at the end of Harry’s bed, conjuring a comfortable chair to sit on as he did so. He sat next to Harry’s head.

“Harry, I am technically not allowed to use my Legilimency powers on a minor. It is classed as assault.”

“No-one is going to know, and I’ve given you permission. I think we can overlook that.”

Dumbledore nodded slightly, keeping his wand at the ready before whispering “Legilimens”. Harry felt a soft probe at the base of his skull, before he latched onto it and forced memories of the future into it. Mainly ones about him being older, with Ron and Hermione. He put in the Horcruxes, Hogwarts burning, and was about to show Dumbledore’s death before the Headmaster held up his hand and broke the connection.

The silence was deafening. Dumbledore’s eyes shone with an unnatural gleam.

“Well that seems to have confirmed it. You have knowledge of the future, or what you think is the future; I will have to spend time working out how. But it seems to me that there is only one option. Knowledge from the future cannot be revealed, the consequences are dire,” Dumbledore intoned, a grim expression on his lined face. “I’m sorry Harry,” he said, taking his wand and pointing it between Harry’s eyes, the gleam in his eyes replaced by a steely glare.

“Wait!” Harry yelled, holding up a hand. “Sir, why would you want to lose this advantage? There have been no problems so far, even though my fight with the Basilisk changed a lot. I can help you!”

“Harry the future is a dangerous thing. I should memory charm you.”

“No, Headmaster.” Harry said his voice deadly calm. “Look at this logically. You’re an opponent of Voldemort. I have knowledge of spies, potential problems, tactics Voldemort might use, the Horcruxes, and a lot more besides. I can fight for you. We would need to keep a careful track of how many people knew of me, but this is an opportunity you can’t afford to lose I think.”

The speech echoed slightly as it ended. Dumbledore pointed his wand at Harry, Harry sat tense in his hospital bed. .

“I’m glad you’ve decided to listen to me, instead of trying to assault me. Like I said, I come from the future and thus have knowledge of what happened, or will happen. Voldemort will return eventually, there is no denying that fact. I can prevent poor decisions that you or the Ministry made previously. I could easily make the fight easier for the

Order of the Phoenix,” the Headmaster blinked in shock at his casual revealing of the secret organisation, “and I need your help to go about it.”

“How?” breathed Dumbledore, a look of grudging respect on his face. The old man seemed to have accepted Harry’s presence and knowledge, and he seemed to acknowledge that he had to make the best of the situation. But, Harry thought, that doesn’t mean he likes it.

“Why, by manipulating as much as I can. The Sorting Hat always said I had a bit of Slytherin in me, I think its time to find out if that’s true. But first we need to sort out the immediate problems. To start with, Ron managed to knock Lockhart unconscious in his office. The man is a fraud, a dangerous one at that. He would have attempted to Obliviate us had we dropped our guard, as he had done to people before to steal their exploits for his books. You’ll need to be careful around him.”

“Harry,” interrupted Dumbledore, “I feel we need to continue this discussion in my office, with Minerva and Severus. They will need to hear this.”

Harry thought for a moment. “Fine, but I need you to fetch Scabbers, Ron Weasley’s pet rat, and bring him to the meeting along with Remus Lupin. I can’t say why, it’s a long story, but it is of the utmost importance.” Harry was slightly unnerved by the calculating look on Dumbledore’s face

“I will do what you ask, Harry, if merely out of curiosity to see the end of this tale. You haven’t convinced me, but you’ve got a strong case. You wouldn’t be the first case of accidental time travel, merely the first who hasn’t died immediately upon arrival.”

“Right, thanks for the vote of confidence. Headmaster, I believe we have a meeting to attend?”

Ooo
oooooooooooooO

In the forest, the creature waited.

It had been waiting for nearly twelve years. It was alone, friendless. Betrayed by its followers. Forced to possess animals to survive.

But something had changed... something had come into the world...
it gave the creature purpose, memories...

Memories of a ritual...the darkest of the Dark arts... the creature needed blood... it needed blood and water... it would live again.

The creature slithered from its lair and set to work.

There was no time to lose.

[illegible]

Half an hour later, Harry was sitting impatiently in the Headmaster's office, which had been turned into a conference room like McGonagall's office. Dumbledore's desk had been transfigured into a vast round table, with several comfortable armchairs surrounding it. Harry was sitting opposite the door, waiting for the others to arrive. After Dumbledore's exit, Harry had been escorted by Madame Pomfrey to the Headmaster's office, dressed once again in his dusty school robes. The Headmaster had seemingly spent the half-hour prepping the teachers and Lupin on what to expect. Harry hoped he had also retrieved Scabbers from Ron, and assumed that the Weasleys were told that they would see Harry later.

Harry had spent the time reflecting silently in McGonagall's office. Once Snape's calming draught had worn off he'd nearly shed a few tears, relieved to see his loved ones alive, but he knew things were far from over. His mask was now back in place; emotion was for when Voldemort was defeated.

His mind was a maelstrom of thoughts. What if Dumbledore double-crossed him? How much should he tell them? Should he tell anyone else? He had come to the conclusion that he had to trust the four people he was about to meet, else he would end up like Mad-Eye.

His thoughts were interrupted as Snape arrived first for the meeting, the sallow-faced potions master sweeping into the room in typically imposing fashion. He scowled at Harry, but seemed to not resent his pupil's existence as much as he used to. Harry was perplexed by the lack of Legilimency performed by the man; he had expected to be probed more often. Perhaps his former teacher was more honourable than he thought.

The door opened again to Dumbledore, McGonagall and Remus, Remus looking slightly confused when Harry waved at him. As far as the werewolf was concerned Harry didn't know he existed, let alone was friends with his father. He only knew that Harry was a time traveller. When everyone was seated comfortably, Dumbledore quietened them down and got to his feet.

"Good evening everyone. I have told you know why we are here, but I feel the need to reiterate. I must tell you before I begin that this information is highly secret. Not a word of it must be breathed to anyone else but who Harry or I deem fit to hear it. I will be telling some others part of the information I possess, but you chosen few will be the only ones to know the whole story."

"Harry is a time-traveller, as I have told you. He and I will try to work out how this happened, but for now he plans to make the most of the situation by helping the Wizarding World cope with the second rise of Voldemort, when that event occurs."

Everyone around the table paled slightly at the proclamation, despite having been briefly filled in. Dumbledore sat back down and motioned for Harry to speak.

"Well," he began, "to start with, there has been a miscarriage of justice in the Wizarding world. Headmaster, do you have Scabbers?"

Dumbledore nodded, with the barest hint of displeasure at handling a rodent, and pulled out Ron's rat familiar, who was fast asleep. Harry hissed in barely suppressed rage and motioned for Scabbers to be put on the table.

“Remus, this is the main reason I called you here. Does this rat look familiar in any way?”

Remus scratched his head in thought as he examined Scabbers. “Well, Harry -may I call you Harry? – this rat looks awfully like... but it can’t be, he’s dead...”

“It’s him, Remus. He was the Secret-Keeper. He betrayed them.” Harry said softly, looking only at Remus. Remus went white as a sheet, looking at Scabbers.

“This is... Peter betrayed them? How do you even know who Peter is?”

Dumbledore was looking aghast. “Peter Pettigrew. He’s an animagus? How did I not know this?”

Remus sighed, defeated. “Sirius, Peter and James became animagi, Albus, to help me out with my little... problem. After James and Peter died... I didn’t feel a need to tell you.”

Snape sneered at this, but made no comment, in stark contrast to McGonagall’s look of horror. Harry looked at Remus sadly, knowing how hard the betrayal must have been. Remus looked deflated, and Harry could only begin to imagine what he must have been thinking. Sirius, his best friend, locked up in the worst place on earth for years, while Remus had thought the worst of him.

Dumbledore cast a charm which caused Scabbers to glow bright blue then expand and morph, turning into a squat sleeping man in seconds. The man woke up and gasped in horror, before Harry petrified him with a hex. Remus now looked furious, angrier than Harry had ever seen him, while everyone else was astonished that Scabbers was, in fact, a fully grown, previously dead, man.

“So, Peter. Remus wants to kill you; some of the people here want to know what’s going on. I think we’ll address the latter first. Headmaster, if you would?” Harry said, not taking his eyes off the man on the table, who was sweating in terror. Dumbledore, not taking his eyes off of the traitor, related an abridged story of Peter’s betrayal.

By the end of it there were no sympathetic faces around the table, most of them were as angry as Remus had been, bar Snape, who just looked bored.

"As you can see," Harry began once Dumbledore had finished, "this scum betrayed my parents. The first time round I let him go. And he promptly resurrected Voldemort," McGonagall managed not to flinch "-normally I would just kill him outright, but I've already had my revenge the first time," everyone except Snape looked perturbed at the implications of this statement, "- I say we lock him in his human form and send him to Azkaban high security wing. This also raises the more pressing problem of Sirius Black. He's been wrongly imprisoned for twelve years. Twelve years. The first time round Fudge and his bumbling Ministry swept it under the rug, only giving Sirius a pardon once he was dead!" Harry sat back down as Dumbledore stunned and levitated Pettigrew into a side room.

"Harry," said McGonagall, "Could you explain what... happened to all of us in the future you're describing? You said Hogwarts was destroyed and that you were alone, but what happened? We need some context."

Harry closed his eyes with a barely audible sigh. It was time to take a trip down memory lane. In his case, memory lane was a path of bodies, lined with the gravestones of his friends.

He began by missing the third year entirely, saying only that Wormtail was discovered and Sirius escaped. Then he briefly summarised the events of his fourth and fifth years, skipping over the actual wording of the prophecy. The sixth year story took a bit longer to finish, due to him wanting to explain about Dumbledore's death in detail.

"... and Draco Malfoy ambushed us, disarmed a weakened Dumbledore. He was there to assassinate you, Headmaster. Death Eaters were inside the school, and the situation was dire. You petrified me as you thought you could talk Draco out of it; it was working... until Snape showed up and killed you."

Shouts of outrage echoed around the room. Harry called for order and continued, a little louder.

"It was a plot. Snape was nothing but an ally to the Order; Dumbledore was dying from a curse placed on the Horcrux ring. By killing him Severus was admitted into Voldemort's inner circle and managed to provide information which saved hundreds of lives. You died how you wanted to, Headmaster." Harry paused merely to take a breath, wanting to finish the tale.

"The Horcrux we retrieved was a fake, however. But that was irrelevant; it had a clue inside which allowed us to locate the real one in short order. You didn't die in vain."

"And then my seventh year kicked off, after a strangely uneventful summer. Of course, I should have been suspicious at that, but it was just so nice to be able to live a normal life... It happened on the third day back, mid afternoon. We were settling back into school life nicely, despite our loss. Professor McGonagall had become headmistress, Slughorn was still the potions master and a man called Tobias Birch was the DADA teacher, I remember he was excellent at the job."

"But ... they came. The Dark Army. I now know what he had been doing over the summer - preparing an attack force. No warning, no one was told. According to Severus, the Death Eaters were left totally unaware an attack was going to happen; their Dark Marks just summoned them and they were given five minutes notice. Hogsmeade was overrun by Dementors in minutes. Professor McGonagall noticed something was wrong when Aberforth ceased his hourly communiqué with her, and alerted the Order. They arrived and the school began to go into full lockdown, as a precaution. Entrances were sealed, gargoyles and suits of armour were activated, the works. All non-combatants, that is fifth years and below and some other students, were escorted to the Room of Requirement; the Floo were sealed by this point. Hogwarts prepared for battle. The Slytherin's tried to sabotage the mobilisation of what forces we had, but they were stopped pretty forcefully and sent to the Room first."

"By this point it was obvious Voldemort was attacking. The front gates were taking heavy punishment; Voldemort himself was casting Obliteration curses and Smashing hexes to punch through the wards. We managed to organise ourselves into a fighting force, all we had

were the students, staff and the Order. Reinforcements from the Ministry weren't arriving; they were caught up in a diversionary attack on the Ministry itself. The only backup was witches and wizards apparating through the damaged wards from around the country who heard their old school was under attack; they were by no means enough. Voldemort had Dementors, Death Eaters, Werewolves forced to transform with a potion, hinky-punks, some vampires, the works. It was looking grim."

"We, that is the human fighters, set ourselves up on the battlements, the suits of armour and gargoyles were in the entrance hall. We assumed the centaurs and other magical denizens would help us, we would gain a numerical advantage that way. But we were mistaken. Voldemort managed to move the wards, shifting them from the boundaries to block the Forbidden Forest. We were cut off from any allies there."

"Then the attack began. I always thought a battle would be glorious, and the light would obviously prevail. It started with a full on charge across the grounds. Voldemort himself hung back slightly, probably waiting for me to show up. We fought, firing spells from the battlements and transfiguring rocks into soldiers, that sort of thing. It was so confusing. I didn't really see much of the proper fighting in the grounds; I was more preoccupied with firing hexes at anything that moved below me. But the Death Eaters themselves were smarter. They managed to Portkey behind us up on the castle walls, removing our one and only advantage. Things became brutal, the students and the Order were vastly outnumbered. People were being hacked down left and right; DA members, Order members, old friends... I was duelling Pettigrew when Remus came to get me and the rest of the students out of there. I managed to push the traitorous rat clean off of the castle walls to his death before I was Portkeyed away. It was... satisfying, I'll admit. Most of the Order were killed, only Minerva and Severus escaped, along with Hermione, Ron and I. The Weasleys, who were in the Order, weren't in the battle, so they all survived. All but Ginny..." his voice cracked as he broke off, but Harry forced himself to continue.

"Hogwarts burned shortly after I left. All the students, Order members, teachers, people from around the country, house-elves... they all

burned. Voldemort used an artefact, one which focused magical power, to simply overload the castle's magical core and cause it to explode. He was injured doing it, or so I heard. Next time I saw him he looked fine." His voice had become deadpan, much like Binns' when he lectured about the Goblin rebellions.

"So how did you spend the next five years, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, his expression grave. There was no twinkle in his eyes now.

"Mainly running and hunting for Horcruxes. We, the survivors, got most of them. The Ministry fell shortly after Hogwarts, so it was just some teachers and students who were left, along with assorted members of the public. We were picked off, one by one... every time Death Eaters found our hiding place for that week, someone ended up dead. Voldemort had the Ministry, he had Hogwarts, he had every resource at his disposal to use against us. Our resistance just turned into trying to kill him. We thought if we could topple him the rest would collapse. It was a fool's hope, looking back on it, but it was all we had. Ron and I were captured during the raid on the last Horcrux, as we were all that was left of the resistance from five years before. That was where the Time-Turner was damaged and I got sent back here."

"And that's why I felt the need to tell you all this. You're the higher ranking members of the Order, and Dumbledore has unique influence in the Ministry. War hasn't arrived yet, but we need to start now. Fudge screwed up last time; he gave Voldemort a year to prepare. If we can just get prepared now, we can make this quick."

Everyone at the table, Snape included, looked numb. The amount of information they had to absorb, the way their world was changing... Harry wasn't surprised they were being so quiet.

"Harry, my dear boy, I know how much that must have hurt you to relive the past you experienced. What you must understand is, by whatever means, you are back amongst loved ones now. We will help you every step of the way to defeat Voldemort. Thank you again for sharing that with us." Dumbledore said, patting Harry on the shoulder.

"I understand, Headmaster," Harry muttered quietly. "But what you must do, now, is tell everyone here something which you kept close to your chest last time. Show us the Prophecy."

Dumbledore winced as the entire table breathed in sharply.

"Prophecy?" Remus asked quietly.

"Yes, the prophecy made by Sybil Trelawney," McGonagall made a small snort of disbelief, "and heard in part by Severus Snape and in full by Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. Professor, are you going to show them or shall I?" said Harry, stony-faced.

Dumbledore seemed to age before Harry's eyes, sagging slightly in his seat. Fawkes flashed onto the table, carrying the pensieve left in McGonagall's office, and Dumbledore wearily extracted the memory. Trelawney appeared above it, rotating on the spot and speaking in her harsh tones. Once she dissolved, everybody stared at Harry, their expression a mixture of shock, anger and... pity. He stared back, daring them to pity him, until Dumbledore cleared his throat.

"And there you have it, the prophecy that Harry must defeat Voldemort," he muttered, his voice dark. "I withheld it all these years... I didn't think Harry was ready. Harry," he turned to face Harry, "Will you accept my apologies? I don't know what happened the 'first' time round, but I trust your judgement of revealing it now." Harry nodded at him, letting him know things were O.K between the two.

"Don't let the prophecy change your view of me," he said to the rest of the room, "I don't know what you thought, if Dumbledore would be the one to finish him off or whatever, but this changes nothing in my eyes. I just have to remove Voldemort from the earth, like putting down a rabid animal. I will have to kill, but it's not murder. Its extermination. I may look nearly thirteen, despite my mental age of twenty-two, but I'm going to be working hard this holiday. Voldemort won't know what hit him."

Most of the people at the table flinched at Harry's frank attitude. He noted, however, that they weren't reacting to Voldemort's name any longer, which could only be a good thing.

“Now, its getting late and I want to go to bed. Sir, can you talk to the Weasleys and let me leave to go to sleep? You’ll have to take care of Peter, sorry about leaving such a mess...”

“Of course Harry, you’ve been through a lot. I’ll have to talk to you about Sirius tomorrow. I was planning to hold a Feast in honour of Miss Weasley’s rescue but now doesn’t seem to be the time... I would just go to bed Harry. You do remember how to access the Gryffindor common room?”

Harry nodded and left in silence, no one quite knowing what to say to the twelve year old. The journey to the common room was too short for his liking; he wanted to wander the halls for a while longer. Hogwarts was his home, and he’d lost it. But now it was back, everything was back. It would take some getting used to. He reached the portrait hole, realising he didn’t actually know the password, but the Fat Lady, under orders from Dumbledore, opened the common room for him.

Harry went up the stairs to the boy’s dormitories, feeling oddly detached from the situation. Ron had already gone to bed, soft snores coming from behind the hangings. Harry didn’t bother to get changed; he just got into his four-poster without a word.

He was back at Hogwarts, and things were looking up. Forget how he got there, he was going to stay.

This time, there would be no mistakes.

Chapter 4 – Some things never change

The creature had been working for hours.

It had sat in the half-darkness, brooding, until it had decided what to do. The ritual would not be easy, but the creature knew that it was the only option remaining. It had possessed an animal and ripped open the rodent's throat, spilling lifeblood onto the forest floor.

Blood. Blood was the first ingredient. The creature would gather the rest in the coming days. But for now, patience was needed until it could get the next one.

The creature knew patience.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooO

Ron screamed as the spikes drove into his flesh, blood splattering onto the tarmac. Voldemort laughed his cruel laugh as Harry looked on, helpless. He yelled out for the madman to stop, feeling his body toss and roll...

Harry Potter woke up, screaming. Ron grabbed him by the shoulders as he tried to get up, saying his name over and over. Harry managed to calm down, his yells subsiding slowly. It was only a dream.

"You alright?" asked Ron, concern in his voice.

Where am I? Harry thought for a moment, before he remembered the previous day. He thought for a moment, trying to come up with a story to deflect Ron, before speaking.

"I'm... I'm fine, thanks Ron, just a bad dream," he muttered, rubbing his forehead. It had been a while since he had had a nightmare like that; he usually practiced Occlumency before going to bed, but had forgotten to do so in all the excitement. But that was all in the past, apparently. Give it a few weeks...

Ron gave him one last searching look before going back to his bed and resuming getting dressed.

“Dumbledore wanted to see you,” he said without looking up. “He said to come to his office as soon as you wake up. And Harry... thanks for saving my sister, okay? Dumbledore told us what you did... and thanks, for that. I’m off to breakfast, I’ll see you later.”

Before Harry could reply, Ron left the room with a wave. Harry sighed and flopped back onto his red and gold four-poster. It was a Sunday, which meant there were no lessons, and the dormitory was empty. He was glad for that small mercy; he didn’t want to have to face his dorm-mates just yet. The sky outside was a pale blue, not a cloud in sight. Any other day he would have wanted to get on his broom and scream his freedom to the heavens. But he couldn’t. Not yet. He needed to keep under control.

He sat in a daze, thinking about what had happened. Every hardship, every death. All undone in an instant. He had been given a fresh chance. He rolled over and breathed deeply into his pillow, holding in his relief and regret as much as he could. He knew he would probably face problems in the future, but he was confident he could deal with them as they happened. Still face down into his pillow, he sniffed and relaxed, feeling rejuvenated. Focused. His emotion was controlled, as it always was. It felt good.

He was tugged from his reverie by the arrival of Fawkes in a silent flash of flame, who probably sensed when he had woken up. The phoenix regarded him imperiously, still edgy about Harry’s change in character. Harry greeted the bird happily and grabbed his wand from his nightstand, muttering a cleansing charm; he didn’t want to go to Dumbledore without even washing. It had been a while since he’d actually used a shower, come to think of it...

Once he was assured of cleanliness, Harry grabbed Fawkes’ offered tail and flashed into Dumbledore’s office, which was still set up for a meeting; all the widgets and gadgets Dumbledore was so fond of were still locked up somewhere, the office was dominated by the polished oak table. Dumbledore, Snape, Remus and McGonagall

were there, sitting around the table with tired looks on their faces, still wearing the robes they'd worn the day before. It seemed to him that they hadn't slept; then again they'd had a lot to discuss. Harry felt positively chipper; he hadn't slept in a bed for a while, either.

"Good morning, Harry," said Dumbledore, gesturing for Harry to take a seat next to Lupin. "We have much to talk about, as I'm sure you know. I also told my colleagues what I know about your little adventure in the Chamber, as per your request. Before you ask how I know, Fawkes gave me quite an accurate account. I will have to talk to you about that as well, mainly regarding the spells you used."

"What he's saying, Potter, is that caused a considerable magical explosion in the bowels of the school! You could have done this establishment considerable damage! Did you think before acting, or were you doing things on impulse, as usual? You'd think, after a decade to grow up, you would have matured, but obviously I'm mistaken!" Snape exclaimed, looking condescending.

"Calm yourself, Severus," Dumbledore murmured, restoring order in seconds. "We need to act like adults, as Harry apparently is one as well. I wanted to summarise our information first of all, so Harry can help us fill in the gaps. Harry," he began, "You say you are from the future, the year 2002 I believe?" Harry nodded, jaw set.

"Excellent. So you said you were hunting Horcruxes," there was a slight shiver from McGonagall, "What I need to know is, can we trace and destroy these Horcruxes ourselves, right now? And what exactly are the Horcruxes?"

"There are six in all, five if you don't count the diary. One of them is a ring belonging to the Gaunt family, who were Voldemort's last surviving relatives. Another is a locket belonging to Slytherin; however it's not where Voldemort left it, as I said yesterday, but I know its location. Hufflepuff's cup is one, it's hidden in Godric's Hollow, and Voldemort's snake, Nagini, who I believe hasn't been actually turned into a Horcrux yet, but I'm not entirely sure. Finally there is Gryffindor's wand, which I think is hidden in London, but that was the one I was seeking when I was captured, so again I can't be sure."

"I see. And you said Voldemort would rise again. I don't think he will be able to repeat the ritual you mentioned last night, so surely we are safe for now?"

"That's the one question I can't answer, Headmaster. There is a bit of Voldemort in me, from this," he tapped his scar, "which allows me to speak Parseltounge and feel some of Voldemort's emotions when he is intensely angry or happy, as I mentioned last night. However this might have unintended consequences; the connection was changed during the ritual in the future, and brining this new connection back into the past, or the present as you view it, might effect Voldemort, perhaps giving him more power. Professor Snape," Snape stiffened at being addressed by his least favourite student, "what Dark Arts rituals could he use wandlessly?"

Snape refused to look Harry in the eye, instead talking to Dumbledore as if he had asked the question. "There are precious few he can do wandlessly. His best hope would be a demonic summoning; those can be performed using surprisingly common ingredients, as long as one knows the ritual. Another would be to possess a human host and absorb their magic; this would take longer but eventually allow him to become corporeal. I would suggest he will go for the latter; the Dark Lord is not one to bargain with demons."

"I'm not so sure about that," argued Harry, "don't demons bargain using souls? Complete souls?"

"That... that is correct."

"But Voldemort doesn't have a complete soul; he has Horcruxes. And the demon in question wouldn't know this, would it?"

"...No" conceded Snape, now looking at the stone wall directly above Harry's head.

"So could Voldemort summon a demon, get himself restored to power in 'exchange' for his soul, and then renege on the deal?"

“...Possibly. But this is all conjecture; we don’t know if the Dark Lord can even summon a demon in his present condition. Death with a Horcrux active can be... unpleasant.”

“Good.”

“So the Voldemort situation is so far undecided,” concluded Dumbledore. “Now, a more pressing matter is that of Sirius Black.” Lupin perked up considerably; he had been shooting Harry suspicious glances, still unsure of what was going to happen to Sirius. Harry nodded and turned his seat to face Remus, wanting his old friend to know how much the situation mattered to him.

“Remus, I know you don’t know me just yet, but believe me I know you. I know what Sirius is going through; he’s been imprisoned twelve years in hell because of that rat you thought was a friend. Speaking of which, where did you put Pettigrew, Headmaster?”

“He’s stunned in the dungeons, locked into Animagus handcuffs,” replied Dumbledore, looking deadly serious as he discussed his former pupil.

“More than he deserves. Anyway, Remus, I want to get to know you and Sirius more this time round. Last time was... cut short. I don’t want it to happen again.”

“Thank you, Harry. Your father would have been proud. I want you to know that I would be happy to get to know you, time travel or not,” promised Remus. He raised his hand awkwardly, as if to put it on Harry’s shoulder, but seemed to think better of it half way through, dropping it back into his lap lamely. Snape’s lip curled slightly, his distaste for James Potter and Remus’ affection evident. Harry shot him an angry glance and shifted his seat back to its original position.

“Well that clears things up somewhat,” said Dumbledore. “I think the next week or so is going to be exceedingly busy; tomorrow is the end of term, and Harry will have to go back to stay with his relatives, so we might have to ask them to be lenient about letting you leave the

house to deal with the legalities of Sirius' release. Then we can start on the problem of the Horcruxes."

"About me going home, Albus," Harry began, a small smile on his face, "The reason I go to my relatives is for blood protection, correct?"

Dumbledore nodded, not quite sure where this was going. "And the blood protection relies on whether I call the place home?"

Dumbledore nodded again, now looking thoroughly uncomfortable. "Unfortunately, I no longer call Number Four, Privet Drive home. I haven't for nearly five years. My mother's sacrifice has expired, sir. I can't go back there. And, if I may say, you were a fool to send me there in the first place." McGonagall gasped quietly; it wasn't often that Dumbledore was openly defied, but it seemed to be happening more and more recently. Harry continued, regardless. "They showed me nothing but neglect. Eleven years, Albus. You didn't think to check on me once? You claim to care about me, yet you left me there, alone? No sacrifice is worth that!"

"I... I'm sorry, Harry," muttered Dumbledore, looking down at his hands.

"You're sorry? Headmaster, I've managed to let go of my past, but you can't just try to wave aside your manipulations. Don't think you know what's good for everyone. The Dursleys aren't really the point, but I'm sure you've realised that."

"Harry..."

"Just drop it. I'll talk about it later. Tell me when you have news of Sirius, unless there's anything else; I'm off to spend time with my friends," Harry spat, his voice bitter. He wanted Dumbledore to really understand how he'd suffered, not pass it off with a lukewarm apology.

"I understand, Harry. I will contact you tomorrow, before the Leaving Feast, with regards to Sirius' situation," replied Dumbledore, his head bowed. No one was able to look Harry in the eye as he walked from the headmaster's office, anger written onto his features.

Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. Malfoy's pale, pointed face lit up as he saw Harry alone; no doubt he thought he was going to have some fun. Harry stopped in his tracks, realising that he was alone with the Slytherin goons in the corridor. He had no idea how to handle a situation like this; defend himself if they attacked him, or just run away? The portraits on the walls near him were all still life; nobody to go for help if need be. Everyone else was outside on the glorious summer day, except the three boys in front of him it seemed.

“Potter! Where are Weasel and the Mudblood? Did they finally come to their senses and ditch you?” Malfoy sneered, sure of Crabbe and Goyle’s protection.

Harry felt a spark of anger, similar to what he’d felt when talking about the Dursleys. Malfoy had been punished for his failure to kill Dumbledore during the second war, but he’d been spared death due to his father’s capture of Snape. He wasn’t as infamous as Lucius, but he had been far from innocent. Harry had had the pleasure of killing the arrogant berk himself; the corners of his mouth twitched at the memory. If it came to it - and he hoped it did - he could beat all three of them in a duel with his hands tied, weedy body or no weedy body. But for now he had better things to do than trade words with a Malfoy.

“I heard the Heir didn’t manage to kill the blood traitor girl. Pity, isn’t it? I really hoped he might just get Granger before it all ended...”

“Malfoy, I’m sure you think that what you have to say is of bowel-shattering importance, but I’m busy. Can we take a rain check?”

Malfoy looked as though he’d been slapped.

“You ought to pay attention to your betters, Potter. We’re alone, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“I did notice that, as a matter of fact. What, you want to ask me out or something?”

Malfoy pulled out his wand, his eyes narrowed. “I’d be careful if I were you.”

Harry abruptly turned on his heel and walked off in the other direction, tired of Malfoy’s self-glorifying speeches. Draco hissed in anger and fired off a mild jinx at Harry’s unprotected back. Harry, moving with frightening speed, drew his wand and deflected the jinx one fluid movement, without turning around. The spell hit Malfoy square in the jaw, knocking him clean off his feet onto the floor. Harry noted with satisfaction the crack his head made as it hit the hard stones; the Slytherin would need a trip to Madam Pomfrey at the very least. And

what was he supposed to say happened? He'd insulted Harry and the Weasleys and then drawn his wand to curse Harry, so Harry deflected his spell back at him. Given his newfound influence with the staff, Harry thought a few points would be lost for Slytherin before the end of the day if Draco chose to complain about being assaulted by Harry.

Crabbe and Goyle watched the short-lived duel with stupid looks on their faces. Harry kept walking calmly, wand still in his hand. They turned and ran back round the corner, going surprisingly fast for boys of their size. Harry snorted in laughter and turned the corner, setting off to find Ron and Hermione. He felt much calmer now, and ready to meet his old friends.

[illegible]

“So what did you say you did to the Basilisk? Dumbledore simply said you’d killed it, but I read that it takes a lot to kill something that big and magical. But really, Harry, you were very silly, going in without Ron,” said Hermione breathlessly. The three of them were lounging under a tree in the grounds, the sun beating down overhead. A short distance away, Fred and George were playing catch with the giant squid in the lake.

"That's what I thought," muttered Ron, picking at some grass.

"I dunno... Fawkes did most of it; he blinded the thing and then I stabbed it with the sword. Wasn't too bad actually; I probably got lucky," Harry recited, lying through his teeth. He'd spent the summer afternoon with his friends, but had found the experience to be strangely unfulfilling. Ron and Hermione were still as he remembered, but they were so... immature. Well, Ron was. Hermione was just irritating him with questions. But he loved her for it really. He'd almost given the game away when he first saw her again, seeing as he hadn't for at least a year in the previous timeline. Somehow he'd held himself in, as he had during those dark times. Running and fighting didn't give much time to grieve, so he supposed he'd never really gotten over the loss of his friend. Regardless, she was here now.

“Anyway, do you think you’ll get an award for services to the school?” asked Hermione.

“I could ask Dumbledore... I reckon if I got one you two would get one too; after all, Ron came with me and you found out it was a Basilisk. I didn’t do it all alone.”

Ron lay back on the grass, squinting against the bright sunshine. “Whatever happened to Lockhart? Last I heard he was still shut in his office.”

“Dumbledore announced that he left in disgrace this morning, Ron. Honestly, where were you at the beginning of breakfast?” scolded Hermione.

“Sleeping in, having gone into the Chamber to save my sisters life! We can’t all be safe and Petrified, Hermione.” Ron shot back. Feeling that an argument was brewing, Harry got to his feet and said they should go to the kitchens for a snack. Ron and Hermione looked at him blankly.

“The kitchens? What do you mean?” said Hermione, a curious look in her eyes.

“Umm... I overheard Fred and George talking about it,” Harry lied again, “There’s this painting with a bowl of fruit, and you tickle the pear and it turns into a door handle.”

“Who actually does the cooking, do you know? There’s nothing in Hogwarts, a History about it.”

“House-elves. Apparently they think its the best job in the world, and they’re the best treated in Britain,” said Harry, eager to avoid a repeat of S.P.E.W. Hermione had her heart in the right place when it came to elf rights, but that didn’t stop it being annoying when she rattled her collection tin under your nose.

“Well, I think Harry’s idea is brilliant,” Ron announced as he sat up and stretched. “I’ve never been to the kitchens, should be a laugh. Come on, Hermione, it’ll be great!” he got to his feet and pulled

Hermione up next to him, a big grin on his face. Harry rolled his eyes. Whenever food was involved, Ron was for it.

The three of them traipsed across the grounds back up the castle, Ron and Hermione chatting merrily while Harry listened. He had missed the conversation, the interaction between the three of them, even if it was a bit juvenile for his tastes. He'd thought he would be more emotional about seeing his friends again, but he was more happy than sad. They'd died, true, but he'd been given a second chance to put things right, and for him that meant putting the past behind him. Harry had had to learn to move on; he'd mourned after Hogwarts burned. That was enough.

"Harry, Harry? Earth to Harry?" said Hermione, clicking her fingers in front of his eyes. Harry started, realising they were in the Entrance Hall. "We don't know the way to the kitchens, Harry, so if you'd be so kind?"

"Oh, sorry, yeah this way," he mumbled, leading them off down the corridor to the kitchens. Soon they found themselves in front of the picture of fruit, which Harry quickly tickled. The pear giggled and morphed into a green door-knob, which Ron turned eagerly, revealing the Hogwarts kitchens in all their glory.

The kitchens were just as Harry had remembered: gleaming, tidy and full of house-elves. What he hadn't expected was to be enveloped in a house-elf sized hug as soon as he entered.

"Harry Potter sir! Harry Potter sir is coming to visit Dobby to see if he has settled in! Harry Potter sir is a brave and noble wizard!" a familiar voice squeaked from around Harry's waist.

"D-Dobby?" he gasped. Dobby was going to give him pins and needles, he was squeezing so tight.

"Yes, it is Dobby, Harry Potter sir! Professor Dumbledore is giving Dobby a job, sir! When Dobby was being set free," the other house-elves, who had perked up at the trio's arrival, looked slightly ashamed, "Professor Dumbledore is asking Dobby if he would like to work at Hogwarts, and Dobby is saying yes!"

"That's... that's fantastic, Dobby! Could you stop hugging me now, please?" wheezed Harry, who was beginning to feel faint. Dobby immediately let go, beamed at Ron and Hermione, who were trying not to laugh, and rushed off to get them some food. Harry massaged his legs, trying to get feeling back into them. As happy as he was for Dobby, the fact he was employed already perturbed him. It meant the timeline he was used to was changing already, things were happening differently. He would have to be more careful, or before he knew it Ron would be the next Dark Lord or something.

"You have a fan, Harry!" sniggered Ron, slapping his friend on the back.

"Sod off," Harry replied, sitting down in a chair a house-elf had brought moments before. Hermione looked around her with a disapproving air, as if something was out of place.

"Harry," she asked, "The house-elves... they are paid, aren't they?"

Ron chuckled at the idea, earning a sharp look from Hermione, while Harry glanced around to see if any of the house-elves had overhead. "Hermione", he whispered urgently, "don't mention pay around here. They don't like it and they don't want it. They're happy here; they get somewhere to sleep, all the food they want, and all the work they want. Freedom doesn't agree with house-elves, I mean it does with Dobby, but it's considered taboo with others. If you want I'll talk about it with you later, but not here, okay?"

Hermione looked chastened, but still shot judgmental stares around the kitchens. Seconds later Dobby and a few other elves arrived, carrying the most enormous table Harry had ever seen. It was laden with every food imaginable, from a whole chicken to a quivering jelly. Ron seemed as though he'd died and gone to heaven.

"Sorry for the delay, Harry Potter sir!" said Dobby. "We didn't know what you or your noble friends wanted!"

"Really Dobby, there's no need," Hermione began, but she was cut off by Dobby.

"All friends of Harry Potters are noble, miss! He is a kind and brave wizard, and friends of all house elves!"

Harry, looking thoroughly embarrassed, thanked Dobby and the other elves for the food and motioned for his friends to tuck in. Ron needed no prompting, immediately loading up his plate with chips, éclairs and sausages. Hermione wrinkled her nose at his mixture of desserts and main course and had some scrambled egg; Harry joined her but grabbed some chicken on the side. They ate in companionable silence, the house-elves topping up their drinks or providing more food if needed.

"Well," said Hermione when they finished, "I don't think I'll ever need to eat again. So you can just come here any time you want?"

"Yeah, but it's against the rules to take food from the kitchens. Nothing about eating food in them though," Harry shrugged. "Bit of an oversight, if you ask me."

"Not really. In Hogwarts, a History..."

"Not right now, Hermione," groaned Ron, loosening the buttons on his trousers. "Exams are over; I don't need to be force-fed facts."

"And being force-fed food which is made by slaves is alright by you then?" Hermione bristled.

Harry sighed inwardly and leant back in his chair as his friends began to bicker. Some things never changed.

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooO

Harry awoke the next day feeling the most refreshed he had in years. After their trip to the kitchens the rest of the day had passed peacefully; a couple of games of exploding snap, a second dinner and a good laugh when Malfoy was punished for duelling by McGonagall. Harry was surprised at her indifference when it came to being around him during the school day, by watching her you would

think Harry was just a normal student, instead of a twenty-two year old time traveller who could be snippy at Dumbledore and get away with it.

Which is what she ought to be acting like if I'm to stay here... he thought with a smile, rolling onto his side. Today was the day of the Leaving Feast, and hopefully the day Sirius' release was organised. Dumbledore promised to have him sit in the meeting with Amelia Bones, and if all went well Sirius would be released tomorrow, providing Fudge didn't try to muscle in.

If all went well. Harry grimaced as he recalled Fudge's ineptitude during the Second War. He had ignored the fact that Voldemort had returned and then, once he was kicked out of office, he spent the rest of the war trying to buy influence wherever he could, hoping to overthrow Scrimgeour. Harry remembered fondly the day he got news of Fudge's death - in an Apparition accident, of all things.

Harry continued to think about his previous life, grimacing and smiling at each memory. He found it helped to introvert himself during quiet moments such as this; he wanted to assimilate into his new life, but was loathe to forget his old one. The memories were less painful now, as though having cried about them had let him come to terms with them.

He reached to grab his glasses and felt a small note on his bedside. He grabbed the two, put on his glasses and shifted around so he could read the note, which was written in familiar loopy handwriting.

Harry, it read, the meeting with Mrs Bones is scheduled for eleven o'clock this morning. Wear your school robes. We are claiming to have found Peter by chance, just to forewarn you.

I am truly sorry about our altercation yesterday.

A.D

Harry screwed the letter up and tossed it to one side, feeling suddenly tired again. Now that the meeting was in – he checked his watch – half an hour, he didn't particularly want to go. Today was

another free day, no lessons, and he wanted to spend it readjusting to his new life. Not stuck in a room with Dumbledore, who he didn't particularly want to talk to at the moment, and Fudge. Only the thought of Sirius, rotting in Azkaban, kept him going. The meeting wasn't really about him and his squabbles with the headmaster. It was about his godfather.

Harry pulled back the curtains on his four-poster to check who was in the dorm. Snore were still coming from Ron and Neville's beds, but Dean and Seamus seemed to have already gone down to breakfast. Harry got dressed in his cleanest (and therefore best) robes, had a quick shower and went off to Dumbledore's office for the meeting with ten minutes to spare. He'd skipped breakfast, but if the worst came to the worst he would stuff himself on lemon drops in Dumbledore's office.

Harry approached the stone gargoyles which guarded Dumbledore's office right on time. Smoothing his hair, he realised he didn't actually know the password.

"Err... Lemon drops?" he asked tentatively.

The gargoyles remained impassive, staring straight ahead.

"Cockroach Cluster? Acid pops, fudge... sugar quill? Pepper imps, ice mice, blood pops, Droobles best blowing gum... Bertie Botts Ever Flavour beans! I don't know, open for f-" he aimed a kick at the base of the nearest gargoyle.

"Excuse me, what do you think you're...? Oh, Mr. Potter?" said Cornelius Fudge, causing Harry to start. He whirled around to see the portly Minister, complete with trademark bowler hat, approaching the gargoyles with a friendly look on his face. Oh shit, he thought to himself. Fudge had evidently heard about the meeting.

"Oh, Minister Fudge, I'm sorry, I'm supposed to be meeting Professor Dumbledore, but he didn't give me the password."

"Is this about Black? Well... I don't know what Dumbledore wants to talk about regarding him, but I can see why he wants you to sit in..."

anyway, the password is Milky Way. Odd, I always thought Dumbledore had sweets as his password...”

Harry hid a smile as the gargoyles moved aside when Fudge mentioned the password, allowing him and Harry to go up the revolving stairs in silence. The headmaster still knew how to make him laugh, despite Harry’s feelings towards the man. However he was still worried about how Dumbledore would take the news of Fudge meeting with them.

“Ah, Cornelius, Harry, good morning,” said Dumbledore with a smile as they entered, giving no indication that he was surprised by Fudge’s presence. Harry gave him a warning look as he sat in the chair in front of Dumbledore’s desk, but Fudge didn’t notice the hostility in the air, greeting Dumbledore with a cheery smile. The room had been restored to normal after the previous day’s meetings, weird gadgets et al. Fawkes’ perch was currently empty; the phoenix was probably out hunting. Dumbledore settled in his seat and gave them an appraising look over his half-moon glasses before beginning,

“Cornelius, Harry here knows what this meeting is about, but I’m afraid I did not inform you as I assumed Amelia could handle it without bothering you. Sirius Black, infamous mass murderer, is innocent.”

The silence that followed was deafening. Fudge was not smiling anymore. He took his hat off of his head and began to fidget with it, staring straight at Dumbledore.

“Innocent? Dumbledore, my good man, you can’t possibly be suggesting-“

“That an innocent man has been locked up in the worst prison facility on the planet for twelve years? Yes I am, Cornelius. I sincerely wish I wasn’t, but there it is. As I meant to tell Amelia, we need to do something about this.”

“What... where’s your evidence?”

“Peter Pettigrew, who apparently confronted Black and was murdered along with twelve innocent Muggles, is alive. He, that is Peter, betrayed the Potters to Voldemort. Peter Pettigrew killed the Muggles, faking his own death. He’s been living with a wizarding family for twelve years. Quite the deception.”

“Preposterous! Next you’ll be telling me he was their Secret Keeper instead of Black!”

“Now that you mention it, Cornelius...”

“Rubbish, Dumbledore! Pettigrew was a bumbling fool of a boy! Always in Black and Potters’ shadow, or so I hear. No one would trust him to be a Secret-Keeper; Black was the obvious and best choice that the Potters had.”

“Cornelius, if you would wait a moment, I can show you Pettigrew. He is being held in my quarters,” Dumbledore waved his wand gracefully and an elegant oak door appeared in the stone wall of his office. “Let me just fetch him.” Fudge began to colour as he grew steadily angrier. Harry smirked at the sight. It was nice to see Fudge rattled, even if the meeting was going as planned.

Dumbledore got up and went through the door, only to emerge a moment later levitating Pettigrew’s unconscious body, bound by handcuffs. Dumbledore cleared his desk with a wave of his wand and deposited Wormtail onto it with a flourish. Fudge looked apoplectic with fear and confusion, his mouth opening and closing randomly. He’d dropped his hat when Wormtail was placed on the desk, not quite knowing whether to pick it up or stare at Pettigrew.

“This is Peter Pettigrew, known to his friends as Wormtail. I assure you, Cornelius, that this is the man you’re looking for. Sirius Black is innocent. He never had a trial and was never interrogated under Veritaserum, but I am sure that if either was done this whole mess would be cleared up. It should be relatively simple to get a confession from Pettigrew once the Ministry officially arrests him,” said Dumbledore, his tone sterner than before.

“Utter rot, Dumbledore,” Fudge replied flatly. “This man could be anyone! Pettigrew didn’t look anything like this man on your desk! Not to mention the fact that you’ve been keeping unauthorised prisoners in your personal quarters. People always said you were funny in the head, and this is only the proof! And how can I trust any confession this man gives? You can alter memories, I know you can. Do you really think I can tell the public Black is innocent and the Ministry failed in upholding justice that badly? I’d be sacked on the spot!” he roared, turning from red to an odd shade of puce. Dumbledore merely took his seat, shaking his head, but Harry had had enough. The meeting had been eerily reminiscent of the one Dumbledore had had with Fudge in the hospital wing at the end of the Third Task; Harry remembered how that one had turned out, and lost it.

“Look, you oblivious moron,” he interjected angrily, “Can’t you get off of your fat arse for one moment and actually look responsibility in the face? You weren’t even minister with Sirius was imprisoned, Bagnold was! What the hell do you have to lose by having justice be done? What do you think you’re going to do, just ignore the fact we’ve captured the man responsible for the murder of my parents? Well?”

Fudge looked from Harry to Dumbledore, fear in his eyes. “Mad. Totally mad, both of you. Black isn’t innocent, he murdered thirteen people! Lucius Malfoy told me Black was perfectly willing, and he would know, having been unfortunately bewitched by You-Know-Who last time round! And if you say otherwise, I’ll have you both arrested! I’m Minister, I can do that! Release that poor man you’ve chained up, and never speak of this to me again, or I’ll see you up in front of your own Wizengamot. Good day, Dumbledore,” he blustered, getting up and practically running from the room. Fudge was so worked up he had forgotten his bowler hat, which lay discarded on the floor.

“Poor Cornelius... so short-sighted... this was why I wanted Amelia.” muttered Dumbledore as the door slammed shut.

“Short-sighted my arse, the man’s a pillock!” Harry retorted, aiming a punch at Pettigrew’s side. Dumbledore’s eyes widened with alarm at Harry’s display of violence, and he waved his wand to send Wormtail soaring back into his quarters before addressing Harry again.

“Harry, please calm yourself. I know you’re angry about Sirius, and I tried my best to help with that, but you must try to control yourself around people like Cornelius. He’s misguided and powerful, a very poor combination. I believe he will try to forget this meeting ever happened, as is his way, but try not to insult the leader of our society again. “

“What do you care? You can just try to pack me off to my relatives again; keep me out of the way. Remember, Albus, I’m not a child anymore. I can see the problems that that man brings, and I can’t stop myself feeling angry about it. Something needs to be done,” he hissed, eyes narrowed. Dumbledore sighed and waved his wand; bringing back the things that were on his desk before Peter was put there. He plunged a gnarled hand into a bowl full of coloured sweets, pondering his reply.

“Lemon drop, Harry?”

“What? No.”

“Harry, I’m sorry. I did try to see Amelia, as you well know. Cornelius showing up was not part of the plan.”

“You can say that again.”

“Indeed. But you must control your temper towards people you disagree with, whether they’re me or the Minister. You’ve been through a lot as a time traveller, Harry, and it kills me to think you’d stay hostile towards me over this. We must be patient in our moves and-“

“All right, all right. You do still have a way with words, I’ll give you that. I know what you’re getting at, and I respect the reasoning behind it. I, in return, am sorry for shouting at the minister. He was like this the first time round; bumbling and unwilling to face facts sometimes. I told you how he refused to admit Voldemort was back... sometimes I think he personally did more damage by doing that than anyone else in the war.” Harry mused, looking out of the window at the clear sky outside.

“He, like me, had his reasons, even if we do not agree with them. Now, I believe you have another glorious summer’s day ahead of you, one which you should spend catching up with your friends. I think you, of all people, deserve that.”

“I’m looking forward to it, Headmaster. Where will I be going tomorrow, as I’m not going with the Dursleys?”

“I took the liberty of contacting Mr and Mrs Dursley yesterday to tell them you wouldn’t be coming back to Privet Drive; they were rather enthusiastic about it. Molly Weasley was most insistent you stayed with her, if that pleases you.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“I will contact you over the summer break with regard to the Horcruxes; we need to begin to gather them up. But, until then, Goodbye, Harry.”

“Goodbye, Headmaster.”

Harry got out of the chair, swiped a lemon drop and left the office, closing the door behind him significantly more quietly than Fudge had done. Under his boyish exterior, his brain was shifting into overdrive.

Sirius couldn’t be freed by legal channels; Fudge had seen to that.

But there were always illegal ones.

He smiled as he descended the revolving stairs. Sirius was in for one hell of a surprise.

Chapter 5 – Eye of the tiger

Harry relaxed into his Hogwarts Express seat with a sigh of contentment, knowing that this year he wouldn't be heading home to the hell that was Privet Drive. The Leaving Feast had gone just as he remembered it; with a resounding Gryffindor victory with regards to the House Cup. Dumbledore taken him aside before he left, promising to mobilise the Order within the next week or so to spearhead the Horcrux hunt. Voldemort was going to be in for a nasty surprise.

"I'm glad you're staying with us now, mate," said Ron cheerfully, sitting down opposite Harry.

"Mum nearly had a fit when Dumbledore told her you'll be living with us; you'll be getting extra meals and stuff for weeks." Ron had taken the loss of his pet rat very well, considering the circumstances. He had been told that Scabbers was a Death Eater in disguise, as had Molly and Arthur, but Dumbledore had kept Pettigrew's identity secret. Ron had, of course, been shocked once he'd heard the news but quickly put it behind him once he knew that the Death Eater had been captured and was being held safely. The conversation had gone relatively smoothly – Molly only shouted at Dumbledore once.

Harry laughed and looked out the window into the cool summer morning. The day was perfect – not a cloud in the sky with a soft breeze wafting through the air. The last of the students got onto the Express as Hermione entered the compartment dragging her trunk, looking harried.

"Has anyone seen my copy of Hogwarts, a History? I can't find it in my trunk," she asked breathlessly.

"Of course, I borrowed it for bedtime reading," said Ron, but so that she couldn't hear. Hermione, with Harry's help, got her trunk into the overhead compartments and managed to find her beloved book tucked into a spare pair of robes; she promptly sat down next to Ron and began to read. Harry popped his head into the corridor to see if anyone wanted to sit with them; he noticed Ginny and Neville walking

down the carriage, being denied entry to packed compartment after compartment.

“Oi, Ginny, Neville! There’s room here!”

Neville smiled waved, almost dropping Trevor the toad, while Ginny blushed furiously and refused to meet Harry’s gaze. She’d been very evasive of Harry ever since he saved her from the chamber, just as she’d been in her second year the first time Harry experienced it. However, he was keen on getting her to overcome her crush and be a normal human being around him this time. After all, they would be living together.

The pair of them entered the compartment and stowed their trunks. Harry and Ron started a game of Exploding Snap while Neville watched quietly. Hermione stopped reading when Ginny entered and stuck up a conversation with her; Ginny was much more normal around anyone other than Harry. She was having nightmares, according to Hermione, but outwardly it was if she had never even heard of Tom Riddle.

As the hours slipped by, the scenery outside the train windows changed from jagged mountains to rolling farmland while the sun climbed higher in the sky. Harry treated his fellow travellers to a horde of sweets when the trolley came round, and they were all laughing and joking together (even Ginny and Neville), swapping Chocolate Frog cards, when an unwelcome face finally made his appearance.

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle opened the compartment door, dark looks on their faces. Neville squeaked with fright, shrinking his seat. Harry motioned for Ron to stay seated, giving his best friend a glance that said ‘I’ll handle this’.

“Well, well, what have we here?” Draco drawled, looking at the angry Gryffindors. “I think there’s a bit of a vermin infestation, don’t you think boys?”

Crabbe and Goyle chuckled, obviously not getting the joke.

“And speaking of infestations... there’s also a couple of Weasels in here; I’d better make sure to shower once I leave. Not to mention the Mudblood over there, this compartment will need a real cleaning when we get to Kings Cross.”

“Shut up, Malfoy” growled Ron, looking as though he’d like to rearrange Malfoy’s innards. Malfoy scowled, but Harry snapped before the blond boy could retort.

“Malfoy, are we going to do this every year? The whole ‘I’m Draco Malfoy, I’m pureblood and rich, hear me roar’ routine is going to get very old, very quickly. Wasn’t the schooling you received in the corridor enough? Or do you want another stunner in the face?” Harry said, getting to his feet. He wasn’t in the mood for this. Draco’s lips twisted into a sneer, his eyes glittering with malice.

“What happened in the corridor was luck, Potter, and nothing more. You want to duel Crabbe, Goyle and I? Be my guest. I’ll remember to have you buried next to your parents.”

Harry pulled his wand from his robes and held it loosely by his side, ignoring Hermione and Ginny’s protests behind him. “I don’t want to fight you Malfoy, let me have that put on the record. I. Do. Not. Want. To. Fight. You. Don’t make me. Please. You’ll regret it.”

The atmosphere in the compartment was electric; Malfoy and his cronies were still as statues.

Harry blinked, slowly and deliberately.

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle went for their wands. Hermione screamed as Harry lashed out with his left fist, smashing into Draco’s soft stomach. Ron whooped in delight as Malfoy went down, clutching his stomach and wheezing. Quicker than lightning, Harry brought his wand back across his body in a slashing motion, muttering an incantation under his breath. Crabbe and Goyle, who hadn’t even raised their wands, immediately fell to the ground, howling in pain as all the hairs on their body became ingrown.

Ron and Neville dissolved into laughter and Ginny looked like she was suppressing giggles. Hermione, on the other hand, looked very forbidding. Malfoy was on the compartment floor, moaning and clutching his stomach and coughing weakly. Harry picked up Malfoy's discarded wand and nudged the fallen boy with his toe.

"Come on then, get up. We've barely started. You wanted to duel, I didn't. You just got your arse handed to you on a plate. Now get up, or I'll snap your wand in half."

Hermione grabbed Harry's arm, ordering him to lift the curse on Crabbe and Goyle, who were still writhing in pain. He did so, reluctantly, sending the pair running away for the second time in two days. Malfoy grudgingly got to his feet, wincing with every movement

"Fuck you Potter," he spluttered, "wait 'till my father hears of this." He tried to straighten up to muster some dignity while Ron sniggered behind Harry. He glanced left and right down the corridor, seeing no one was paying much attention. He held Malfoy's wand in two fingers in front of the Slytherin's eyes.

"Leave us alone in future." He said, stony faced, dropping Malfoy's wand at his feet and shutting the door.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed in hate and gave Harry one last look before turning on his heel, collecting his wand from the floor, and walking off down the corridor towards the bathroom, brushing aside people who were coming out of their compartments to see what the noise was all about. Muttering about stupid inbreds, Harry sat back down in his seat.

"Why the hell did you let him go, Harry?" Ron practically yelled as Harry sat back down. "He attacked you!"

"Yeah, and he has no evidence that I injured him. He can hardly say I hit him when no one saw him, can he? No one's going to believe him. This way I get to humiliate him a little and not get in trouble," Harry replied, feeling drained as well as guilty for lying to his friends. Punching Draco had hurt his hand slightly; he needed to do some

training during the holidays for sure. He was still getting used to having a twelve-year old body.

Hermione sniffed in disapproval at the violence, disappearing again behind Hogwarts, a History. Ginny and Neville congratulated Harry and restarted the abandoned Exploding Snap game while Harry and Ron, shrugging at Hermione's stern demeanour, began to talk Quidditch.

[illegible]

Platform 9 ¾ was just as Harry remembered it; bustling, noisy and full of parents greeting their offspring. He hadn't seen the platform since the beginning of his seventh year, although he'd heard that Voldemort had blocked off the magical entrance shortly after he destroyed Hogwarts.

Harry took a deep breath of the summer air as he stepped off the train, lugging his trunk behind him. He scanned the heaving crowd on the platform, quickly spotting Mr and Mrs Weasley hugging Fred, George and Percy, who had disembarked before Harry. He waved at them, and grinned as they waved back enthusiastically. He hadn't really given it much thought while on the run in the other timeline, but he missed the Weasleys more than anyone else, save Dumbledore and Sirius. This time round he would endeavour to build bridges with Percy, which would perhaps stop him ostracizing his family so harshly.

Harry helped Hermione and Ginny with the trunks and forged his way through the crowd with his friends in tow, until he finally emerged next to his new foster parents.

“Harry!” exclaimed Mrs Weasley, looking fit to burst. “We never thanked you for saving our Ginny! And now you’re part of our family!” she grabbed him in a bone-breaking hug, and Harry was painfully reminded of how short he was when their heads collided. Mrs Weasley dispensed hugs and kisses to the rest of the entourage, even Neville, who looked thoroughly surprised to be included. Harry wasn’t surprised; his grandmother hardly looked like a cuddly person.

Hermione spotted her parents standing a short distance away, looking apprehensive at the sight of all the magical folk, and said her goodbyes, giving Harry and Ron tight hugs and promising to write to them over the summer. Neville also waved goodbye to his friends, still looking confused as to why they were hanging around him, and walked off to meet his grandmother, a stern looking witch in a distinctive hat. Harry grinned to himself, hoping that Neville would come out his shell of self-doubt quicker this time round.

“Do you have everything? Harry, Ron? Is Hedwig alright for the journey?” Mrs Weasley asked, switching into motherly mode. Harry checked his faithful companion, who he had had little time to fuss over since his accident with the time turner. In the future Harry had experienced Hedwig had burned along with Hogwarts; yet another casualty of Voldemort’s campaign. Having everyone around him and caring for him was beginning to get disorientating for Harry; he relished the thought of a quiet nights sleep in the Burrow.

“She’s fine, Mrs Weasley. Shall we go?”

“Do call me Molly dear, or Mum,” said Mrs Weasley. “After all, the foster papers came through just this morning – although I’m positive Dumbledore had something to do with how fast they were approved. You’re a Weasley now, it seems, though I think your second name should stay Potter. After all you are the Harry Potter!”

Harry and the other Weasleys laughed and headed off the platform, Harry shielding his eyes against the June sun and swapping jokes with Fred and George. Ron had told them all excitedly about how Harry had handled Malfoy on the train (taking care to be out his mother’s earshot) – the twins had been deeply impressed.

“It seems ickle Harrykins could be a champion dueller when he’s older,” they’d said, identical smiles on their freckled faces.

The Weasleys had managed to secure a Portkey to get them to the Burrow, which they gathered around near the magical barrier separating platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ from the muggle world; Harry remembered with a smirk how he and Ron had crashed their old Ford Anglia into the Forbidden Forest, and how it had been running wild ever since.

He didn't know what Mr Weasley had done to it, but it had made the old automobile grow a mind of its own. Harry jerked himself out of his reminiscing; he'd almost missed the Portkey, only just getting his finger onto it in time and feeling the all-too-familiar jerk behind his navel as the Weasleys, owls and luggage were all whisked away to the Burrow.

[illegible]

Harry awoke the next day in an unfamiliar bed; panic lanced through his body before he realised that the foreign room wasn't on fire – it was merely the garish orange colour of Ron's bedroom ceiling, and he was in a camp bed. He exhaled and put his glasses on, still staring at the orange ceiling.

Being back at the Burrow was like coming to his home away from home; Hogwarts would always be where he belonged but the Burrow was where he would always be loved. When it had been destroyed early on in the Second War, Harry had been devastated; not to mention the fact that most of the Weasleys were inside the house when it was eradicated. His heart ached slightly as he thought of the horrible memory of a distant future; but it wouldn't happen this time round. Reminiscing only served to strengthen his resolve, remind him that he had to stop Voldemort before he could mount too high a death toll.

It also reminded Harry that he was very hungry, and should get dressed for breakfast. He sat up and saw Ron sleeping quietly (for once) in the bed across the room. Harry got up, just wearing boxers, grabbed some clothes and headed for the shower, taking care not to run into anyone in the Burrow's meandering landings and stairways. He had been fairly quiet until he opened the unlocked bathroom door on the third floor – to reveal Ginny wrapped in a towel, drying her hair and humming.

Harry yelled in shock and slammed the door, breathing heavily. He did not need surprises like that first thing in the morning. He quickly opened the airing cupboard next to the bathroom door and snatched a fluffy white towel to cover himself before Ginny came out. As he tied

the towel off around his waist, Ginny opened the door a crack, looking mortified that a half-naked Harry had nearly seen her showering. She then hurried past him, brick red and not looking at him at all.

Harry sighed. So much for stopping her having a crush on him; at this rate he would make her think he had a crush on her. He'd dated Ginny in his previous life and regretted breaking up with her after Dumbledore's funeral, but he had to remind himself that she was barely pushing twelve in this time. It would be unhealthy to encourage her.

After he'd showered himself thoroughly (making sure to lock the door), Harry examined himself in the long, slightly cracked bathroom mirror. He needed to start exercising, the sooner the better. He was pathetically scrawny, something which Mrs Weasley could probably solve with her famous cooking, and Hedwig had more muscle than him at the moment. Flying on broomsticks just wasn't a good enough physical education in Harry's opinion. His face was at least how he remembered, if slightly rounder and lighter. Hair, deep black and untidy, hung in wet rattails over his emerald eyes, which looked older than they should be at that age. All in all, his body felt alien to him.

"Room for improvement, methinks," the mirror muttered. Harry gave it a rude gesture and finished drying off, vowing to start exercising, starting the next morning.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooO

Harry ambled down the stairs into the cramped kitchen and was greeted exuberantly by Mrs Weasley, who was setting the large family table for breakfast. Harry helped her carry the worn cutlery and was starting to attack his bacon with gusto when Ginny came into the room. She squeaked in surprise on seeing Harry, and flushed her characteristic red, but met his eye this time. Harry grinned at her, eliciting a small smile from the eleven year old. She sat down quietly opposite him and loaded up her plate.

"Harry, dear, do you have any plans for today?" said Mrs Weasley from behind them, still busy preparing breakfast.

"I dunno," he replied, swallowing a mouthful before replying. "Might play Quidditch with Ron, or do some chores if you want me to."

"How about we go to the village?" Ginny said, almost to herself than anyone else, making Harry start.

"That sounds good," he agreed, giving her a smile. Ginny flushed and busied herself getting a drink; the tap had suddenly become unbelievably fascinating to her.

"Where on earth are the others?" Mrs Weasley fussed as she put another round of bacon on the table. As if answering her call, Ron stumbled into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes. He, unlike Harry and Ginny, was still in paisley pyjamas, something which Harry chose not to comment on. He remembered how slow Ron could be until he ate in the mornings – asking him why he wasn't dressed would probably be too difficult for him to answer before breakfast.

Ron sat down heavily, grunting a greeting to the room. He piled more food onto his plate than the other two put together and began to eat a sickening pace. Harry winced and concentrated on his own food, only looking up when he was done. Once his plate was clean, he kicked his chair back on two legs and thought about his new family. Being honest with himself, he had always wished to be a Weasley. To be in a family, a unit who accepted him without question and loved him in return for nothing. It was things like this which made Harry ever grateful that the Time Turner accident had happened. He knew the Weasleys couldn't really replace his mother and father, had they been alive, but really he could think of no one better to live with in lieu of actual parents.

Looking around at the slightly shabby kitchen, a revelation struck him, causing him to grin from ear to ear.

"Wha' 'choo grinning for?" Ron spluttered through a mouthful of food.

"Nothing," Harry began quickly, still grinning. He quickly got up from the table and crossed the kitchen to where Mrs Weasley was. "Mrs

Weasley, is there any chance I could talk to you for a moment, in private?”

“Certainly, dear. In the living room?” she said. Harry nodded and they moved into the living room, ignoring Ron’s curious look. “What was it you wanted, dear?”

“Mrs Weasley, I wanted to know if you’d looked carefully at the foster notice Dumbledore gave you.”

“Well... I haven’t really had the time. Arthur assured me Dumbledore knew what he was doing...”

“Oh no, Professor Dumbledore knew what he was doing... the thing is, now that you’re my trustees, you have full access to my Gringott’s vault. And I’m perfectly happy to allow the entire family full access to my funds.”

Mrs Weasley’s mouth dropped open slightly. She knew how rich Harry was, or at least had an idea. “Harry... I... I can’t possibly accept what your offering me. The Weasleys don’t do charity, I’m afraid.”

“How is it charity if I’m a Weasley? I’m not saying you need to buy a new house or anything, but if you need new robes or books or brooms, then what’s mine is yours. I don’t want to freeload while I’m staying here. Plus, you could set up vaults for Ron, Ginny and the twins and let them learn how to manage their finances.”

“I’ll have to talk to Arthur about it, Harry, but I must say... if your sure... then we gratefully accept. Do you want to tell Ron and the others, or should Arthur and I do it later?”

Harry grinned. “I reckon I’ll do it now, if you don’t mind. I want to see the look on Ron’s face when he realises he’s richer than Malfoy!”

Mrs Weasley chuckled and smoothed down Harry’s unruly hair, almost as a reflex action. They ducked back into the kitchen and Harry sat back down in his seat while Mrs Weasley went back to the stove, intending to Firecall Mr Weasley later on.

“Well?” Ron demanded, his mouth not full for once. “What was all that about?”

“Ron!” Ginny admonished. “Don’t be so rude all the time!”

“Don’t worry, Ginny. I have something of an announcement to make. Your mum just agreed to set you all up accounts from my, frankly overfull, vault. Something of an experiment so you can all learn to be responsible with money or something. Anyway, the long and short of it is, you’re all pretty rich now.”

Ginny’s fork clattered onto her plate, a look of surprise and realisation on her face. “What?” she piped up, her crush on Harry forgotten for the moment.

Harry nodded slowly, giving her another broad grin. Ron looked at them both, a bemused expression on his face. “What?” he said with all the dignity he could muster with his mouth full of scrambled egg.

“You now have money to burn, guys! I’m not saying we’re all going on holiday to the Bahamas, but new robes certainly aren’t out of the question. Your mum is going to talk to your dad about it later.”

“Weasleys don’t do charity.” Said Ginny flatly.

“I am a Weasley now, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“In that case I’ll forgive you, mate!” Ron grinned, slapping Harry on the shoulder. “Money... my god, I can’t wait to see Malfoy’s face when I have better stuff than he does!”

“Now, Ron, that isn’t what this is for!” Mrs Weasley called from behind them. “The money is for you to spend sensibly.”

“Sorry mum!” Ron called back. “Yeah, like I said, Malfoy’s face will be a picture!” he added under his breath so his mother couldn’t hear.

“Can I tell Fred and George?” Ginny asked. She looked slightly overwhelmed with Harry’s generosity, but smiled widely when he nodded. “Thanks, Harry!” she got up and gave him a quick hug,

seemed to realise what she had done, turned beet red, and sped off upstairs.

“Girls,” muttered Ron.

[illegible]

“And I said to him, ‘Lee, buddy, I meant 12pm, not am!’”

The rest of the group collapsed into giggles at Fred and George's anecdote, including Harry, who hadn't heard the story in the previous timeline. Fred, George, Harry, Ron and Ginny were walking up the rutted dirt path through the woods which separated the Burrow from Ottery St Catchpole proper. Their trip to the village hadn't been especially eventful, but it had let Harry get used to what he supposed was his new home. The sun was beginning to set in the summer sky; they had been out for longer than they'd anticipated.

“Good one guys,” Harry said, smiling. He was especially pleased as Ginny seemed to have already overcome the first major obstacle in her crush on Harry; namely being able to treat him as a normal human being. She had quickly reverted to blushing and avoiding his gaze, especially after the impromptu hug earlier, but after a long afternoon of close interaction with Harry, who tried to strike up conversation with her at every opportunity, she was seeing him as one of the family.

Fred and George had taken the news of the Weasley's newfound fortune especially well (perhaps too well), their eyes lightning up in glee at the thought of what use the money could be put to in regards to pranking. Harry had it down on his 'to-do' list to retrieve the Marauder's Map from the pair, but he had decided to defer the task until the beginning of the school year.

The group emerged from the small stretch of woodland and, still chatting amicably, walked into the kitchen, where Mrs Weasley was busy preparing dinner. She scolded Fred and George, who were supposed to be the responsible ones, for staying out so late, but she

wasn't allowed to build up a full temper as she was distracted by the shifting of Mr Weasley's clock hand from 'Work' to 'Travelling'.

"Your fathers coming," she announced, chivvying the children towards the dining table. Seconds later the door opened to reveal Mr Weasley, looking threadbare and exhausted. He perked up at the sight of his family and Harry, giving them all a cheery wave and kissing Mrs Weasley on the cheek.

"Hello, everyone," he said as he sat down at the dinner table. No one replied, the atmosphere in the room suddenly changing to one of intense anticipation. Mrs Weasley tore herself away from the stove and took a seat next to her husband, taking his hand.

"Arthur," she began, "We have some news for you."

"News, Molly dear?"

"It's about the foster documents."

"Nothings gone wrong, has it?" he said nervously, shooting Harry a glance. The tension cranked up a notch.

"Well... the thing is, you know we've never really been all... that well off."

"My family is far more important than my finances, Molly, you know that."

"Well, Harry feels he should give something back to us, even though I think he's being silly. He's offered to get the children proper vaults set up, and let us have free access to his one. I think we won't need to worry about finances anymore."

Everyone was quiet, waiting to see Mr Weasley's reaction. Harry edged forward in his chair.

"That's... well. I..." Mr Weasley began, looking very flustered, but Harry cut him off.

"You don't have to say anything, Mr Weasley. I don't want you to think of this as charity, just as something I can give to you in return for taking me in. And while money may seem a bit superficial, I want to do all I can."

Ginny and Mrs Weasley sniffed, and Mr Weasley gave Harry a very jerky nod.

“Harry... I don’t really know what to say... just know that you’re one of the family now, and we’re all here if you need us...”

Ron, eager to stop the emotional scene before he succumbed, loudly asked Mrs Weasley if dinner was ready yet. She and Ginny jumped, wiped their eyes covertly and rushed off to get the dinner and call Percy down.

Harry relaxed back into his seat, chattering animatedly with Mr Weasley about what Muggle gadgets he could buy. It had been a trying day for him, but he wouldn't have traded it for the world.

[illegible]

Harry got up bright and early the next day, intending to start his exercise regime. In the future he hadn't formally trained; constant battle was as good as any regulated exercise. But, thankfully, this time things looked peaceful, yet Harry was unwilling to let himself slide. After the previous night's dinner and discussion he had lain awake, thinking about what to do. A running programme to build up his stamina was what he'd settled on – ideally he would use Muggle exercise machines but he couldn't imagine where they would be able to put them in the Burrow.

He pulled on a faded t-shirt, some shorts and a pair of battered trainers before creeping out of the room, so as not to disturb Ron, who was snoring like a broken engine. Harry had thought about where to run the previous night as well, and had thought the path to Ottery St Catchpole would be a reasonable distance to start with.

Once he'd scribbled a note to Mrs Weasley explaining where he was in case she came down early, he set off down the garden path in the crisp morning air. For a while all he heard were his feet pounding the dirt road and the sound of his own laboured breathing echoing off the silent trees around him. His attention was quickly diverted however, by the fact that running even the half mile to Ottery St Catchpole was proving to be a Herculean task.

Quidditch is useless for this sort of thing, he thought mutinously, panting heavily. Harry came to a stop at the end of the path, which lead out of the woods and down into the village proper. Resting against a gnarled tree, he tried to catch his breath.

Evidently, he wasn't as fit in this life as he had been in his old body. Harry sat down at the base of the tree as he thought of his previous life. He was still a good distance away from the village and was alone on the wooded path. A perfect place to think.

The past had been a horrible place, a place of blood and darkness. Everyone had died. Everyone had lost. He had been the last man standing in the end of it all. In one day of terror and violence, one battle which was supposed to decide the fate of the world, everything had gone to hell. The Order had been decimated; he had been left with only a handful of companions left to take out Voldemort, the Death Eaters and the Horcruxes.

He laughed to himself quietly, drawing his knees up to his chest. Thinking back on it now, the whole thing was ridiculous. Sure, he had prepared himself - learned advanced curses, how to defend himself physically – but it was just a joke, when it came down to it.

One year after the battle, it was just him, Ron and Hermione. And they had failed. Hermione had died, Ron had died in front of him, and what had Harry done?

He had tried to run, to save his own skin. Pathetic.

He pressed his hands against his eyes, breathing heavily. Harry whispered to himself, telling himself it had all changed, he had been given a second chance. He had two years head start on Voldemort

and enough knowledge to send the bastard straight to hell. There would be no more running this time.

But a little voice in the back of his head kept whispering...

But you could never defeat Voldemort, could you? You could duel him to a standstill, sure. But killing blows?

Never.

Harry got roughly to his feet, closing his eyes and focusing on a cool metal wall. The Occlumency exercise calmed his breathing, banished the voice. He turned back towards the Burrow and began to jog again, barely seeing the path ahead, the pain in his lungs and legs totally forgotten as he focused on the wall.

[illegible]

“Harry, dear! Dumbledore is in the fire, he says he needs to speak to you!” Mrs Weasley called from the kitchen, interrupting Harry’s chess game with Ron.

Two days had passed since Harry's first jogging trip. The twins had sniggered at the thought of Harry exercising, but he himself was secretly proud of his progress. After the first day he'd managed to jog the whole way to the village and back without a rest, despite the fact that it had thoroughly exhausted him.

“What do you think he wants?” Ron asked, a puzzled look on his face. Harry shrugged in a non-committal way and knocked over the black king, signalling his resignation from the game. His relationship with Ron had been slightly strained since he’d arrived at the Burrow; he just couldn’t shake the feelings of irritation at Ron’s immaturity, even though he knew it was natural for his friend to be that way. Harry reckoned he would be more like a little brother than a best friend; after all, Harry was more like Bill or Charlie’s age now.

He ducked out of the living room and into the kitchen, which was, for once, relatively peaceful. The family had only just had lunch, so Mrs

Weasley wouldn't be cooking dinner for a while yet. Mrs Weasley herself was currently chatting animatedly to Dumbledore's head, which was sitting in the fire. Upon seeing Harry, he smiled, but the expression didn't reach his eyes.

"Headmaster." Harry said with a guarded expression on his face.

"Harry, my dear boy, how are you? Molly was just telling me about your generous sharing of funds with her and the rest of the family."

"I do whatever I can for them; they're my family now after all."

"And I'm glad you're with them. Now, to get to business, I need to see you in my office, Harry. Molly, could I borrow your charge?" said Dumbledore with another smile, the twinkle in his eyes returning. Mrs Weasley, once she had confirmed that Harry would be back for dinner, sent him on his way with an embarrassing hug and kiss.

Harry threw the Floo powder in and stepped into the fire, saying the name of his destination clearly. "Hogwarts, Headmaster's office!"

The Floo trip was as dizzy and uncontrolled as ever, grates flying past Harry's vision before he was unceremoniously dumped onto the Headmaster's scarlet carpet. He heard a quiet chuckle upon arrival, and muttered some choice words under his breath before getting to his feet. The office was as it had been with Fudge, save for the lack of portraits on the walls, like in the meetings with McGonagall, Snape and Lupin. Evidently Dumbledore didn't want to just talk about the weather.

"Harry, take a seat. I need to talk to you about Sirius," said Dumbledore, who was sitting in his chair with an inscrutable expression on his lined face. Harry stiffened at the mention of his godfather, plans whirring around in his head. The past few nights at the Burrow had been spent thinking about Sirius, namely what was going to happen if Fudge refused to release him.

"Fudge has made his verdict. Sirius is not to be released, despite the obvious evidence we have presented him with." Dumbledore sighed, holding up a hand as Harry opened his mouth to abuse the Minister.

"We have taken Pettigrew to a secure location, under the Fidelus Charm. Fudge is under the impression that we released him. All is well, or so he thinks. What I wanted to talk to you about, Harry is to check that you won't do anything... rash."

"Rash?" Harry barked, "Rash? It's nice to see what you think of me, Albus. Consider what you're asking, first of all. I've spent five years in hell, seven of them minus the company of my godfather. A pathetic, toadying little worm of a man who has managed to wheedle his way into power is denying my godfather his rightful freedom. Of course I'm going to do something, and if you were smart you'd let me."

Dumbledore took a deep breath and rubbed his eyes under the half-moon glasses he always wore. "This is what I was anticipating, Harry. You must not go into Azkaban. Oh, I don't doubt that you could break into Azkaban and rescue Sirius, seeing as you spent five years of your life fighting Death Eaters, but just because you can doesn't mean you should. What if the Ministry think its Death Eaters? What if they think it's me? I don't mean to sound selfish or arrogant, but the finger of blame would naturally fall upon me if you performed a jailbreak."

"Don't try to control me, Albus. You did that for six years and you ended up dead. I didn't come back on purpose, but I'm here now. Negotiations, subtlety, espionage, none of that worked last time. Voldemort is probably trying to return as we speak, and he could be doing it in a different way to last time! The timeline's already changing!"

Dumbledore turned the colour of old porridge as his head snapped up sharply to give Harry his full attention. "What?" he gasped.

"Dobby, the house elf. In my timeline it took him a year to get work at Hogwarts. Here, he got it instantly. I've also been adopted by the Weasleys, for heaven's sake! Things are different this time round, Albus. If we don't act soon we'll be flying in the dark, future knowledge or no future knowledge."

"I knew this would be a problem," Dumbledore muttered, stroking his impressive beard. "I had planned to hunt for Tom's Horcruxes later on

this summer, but, from what you've told me, things are going to have to accelerate. I'll send out the old crowd by the end of the week. We can pick up the locket and the ring easily; the cup will be a tad more difficult, I fear. And there is the small matter of the Wand, whose location is currently unknown."

"Thank you for seeing my side of the argument, Headmaster," said Harry quietly, relieved that no argument was forthcoming and that Dumbledore was going along with his requests.

"My apologies for trying to control you, Harry. When someone as old as me has held onto the reins of power for so long, relinquishing or sharing them to someone who looks as young as you... it isn't easy. They say power corrupts, and I like to conveniently believe that applies to every case but my own. However that does not mean you can simply blow your way into Azkaban and free Sirius. That is more of a request between friends than an order, but I implore you to uphold it." Harry nodded solemnly.

"On that note, Severus wants an assessment of your abilities before you return to Hogwarts. I assume, of course, that you will be returning to school?"

"Naturally, although I may stir things up a bit, sir," Harry smirked.

"Understandable, my boy. I will have Severus contact you next week to arrange a meeting. Well, Molly will undoubtedly be waiting for you, armed with some of her famous cooking. Off you pop."

Shaking his head and smiling at Dumbledore's patronising tone, Harry grabbed some Floo and stepped into the fireplace, shouting "The Burrow!"

As he left, a small smile was playing about Harry's lips. He had lied about something to Dumbledore, an accomplished and powerful Legilimens.

He had every intention of breaking Sirius out of Azkaban.

Chapter 6 – Insubordination

It was raining at Azkaban. It was always raining at Azkaban, but tonight the rain was more intense than usual, as if it was trying to tear down the unholy fortress through the sheer force of a myriad of tiny impacts. It rattled the windows in their housing, sounding like tiny firecrackers continually exploding against the ancient glass.

Benny leaned his chair back on two legs, sipping some cold tea nonchalantly. It had been two days since Harry talked to Dumbledore, but Benny had no idea the conversation had ever taken place.

Benny was an Azkaban guard, at least for this week anyway. Only five human guards, usually Aurors, were actually stationed at the prison, in weekly shifts. They spent most of their time on the ground floors, far away from the soul-sucking Dementors. Benny was relaxing at the end of the day, writing up some paperwork. The silencing charms on the window in his office cancelled out the ear-splitting racket outside. The charms were only in Auror-designated zones; the prisoners wouldn't be getting much sleep tonight.

He closed his eyes and sighed deeply. Tomorrow he would be able to go home to his wife and enjoy his two day post-Azkaban leave. Who said there were no perks to being an Auror?

His thoughts were banished in an instant when an innocent red light on the wall began to pulse softly.

There were intruders in Azkaban prison.

Oooo
oooooooooooooO

The creature had been waiting for days. Days spent finalising its plan. It knew what it had to do, and how much rested on the fickle whim of an otherworldly creature. Its plan was far from perfect, but it was the only one the creature had.

With a barely-audible hiss, the creature left the snake it had been inhabiting and entered the mind of the small child standing scant feet

away. The mousy-haired boy stiffened momentarily, fought the possession. But the child was weak compared to the creature's power.

Mindlessly the unwitting victim set off down the heavily-wooded path to do the creature's bidding.

Stage one of the plan was complete.

Oooo
oooooooooooooO

Benny cursed fluently under his breath. As soon as he'd seen the red light he'd leapt to his feet and hit the general alarm. The other four Aurors had gone to seal off the exits, leaving him to deal with the intruders. The Dementors were becoming frenzied, according to the tracking devices on his desk. But what chilled Benny to the bone was the location of the disturbance.

The high-security floor, located at the top of the prison. The Lestranges, Black, Crouch. They were all there; the famous and the infamous of the wizarding world. And that was why Benny was clutching his wand in his hand until his knuckles turned white. His black cloak billowed behind him as the guard climbed the rugged stone stairs. Finally, after what seemed like an age, he reached the top floor, punching the button to let the Dementors know that an Auror was approaching.

Not that that would do much good if they had gone into a feeding frenzy. Benny gulped nervously and put his hand on the thick door's handle. Finally, he turned it.

The corridor was deserted. The individual cell doors were all shut as they should be. But the corridor was deserted.

Where the hell are the Dementors? Benny wondered, running his hands over his regulation buzz-cut. He stepped cautiously out into the corridor, hand still gripping his wand tightly. He passed door after door, checking the ward-indicators to see if the prisoners were contained.

He reached Sirius Black's cell.

Benny's blood ran cold.

[illegible]

The small boy walked nonchalantly from the communal hut, a bottle of expensive wine hidden under his shirt. The wine was probably the most valuable thing in the village, and the creature knew it. The gypsy tribe had set up camp a few months back, prompting the creature to consider possible means of manipulation. He had drawn a blank, unusual for the creature, but at last he had a concrete plan.

The child stole into the night, clutching the bottle.

Now for stage two.

[illegible]

Sirius Black's ward indicator was a sickening red, showing total ward failure. The man was free to leave if he wanted. Benny knew Black's reputation; he was a mass murderer of the most insane kind. But he didn't have a wand and seemed to still be in his cell, a fact which Benny was eternally grateful for. He gave the door a gentle push, letting it glide open on its magically-cleaned hinges.

Inside the cell was a scene he couldn't have imagined if he'd tried. The entire back wall of the cell had been blown open, covering the small enclosure with dust. Black lay unconscious on the floor, apparently from the explosion. But it was not those things which caught Benny's attention.

What caught his attention was the man sitting, cool-as-you-please, on the rubble from the wall. Rain lashed at his back and wind whipped up the edges of his cloak, but the man didn't seem to care. He tossed his wand from one hand to the other, staring at the door. He was dressed in the most flamboyant costume Benny had ever seen; a

long tightly closed cloak dancing with what looked like real flames and trimmed with red, a hood which was peaking, giving the man's shadow what looked like a beak, topped off with a red, featureless mask. All the reds were different shades. The overall effect was more eye-damaging than intimidating, but Benny was still rooted to the ground in fear.

Where were the Dementors?

"Freeze!" Benny yelled, training his wand on the mysterious figure. The man just turned his blank face to Benny's; behind the mask Benny could sense eyes boring into his own.

"Drop the wand!"

The figure looked at the wand he had been tossing and did nothing. Benny took a step forwards, into the cell, but was instantly pushed back by an invisible force. The wards. Apparently the masked intruder had managed to reverse the ward's targeting arithmancy; they kept people out rather than in.

"Trouble?" the intruder said in a deep voice, getting to his feet in the rain-drenched cell. The wind was becoming unbearably loud; you had to shout to stand a chance of hearing anything. The staccato beat of raindrops on the floor didn't help, either.

"Who the hell are you?" Benny replied, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up. The man's cloak was hypnotic; flames streaking across it like mercury.

"A mutual friend. I have a message for you: This man is innocent. Tell that to your boss."

"Bullshit! Reverse the wards, you're under arrest!"

The man laughed, a strangely hollow noise. "I have no intention of being detained by that moron you call a minister. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm out of here." He knelt on the sodden stone floor and cast a feather-light charm on Sirius' unconscious body, tossing it over his

shoulder. With that, the man clambered over the rubble to the hole in the wall.

“You’re mad!” shouted Benny over the wind as he realised what the man was going to do.

“If I wasn’t this would probably never work!” was the reply, as the masked figure launched himself off the side of Azkaban prison.

Benny felt the wards on the door go down; he ran through them, skidding on the floor. He gingerly peered out of the hole to look at the sea below.

There was nothing there. Benny shielded his eyes against the rain and beat a hasty retreat. This was going to create a hell of a lot of paperwork...

Ooo
ooooooooooooO

The child got off of its knees, sighing with satisfaction. The ritual was prepared; blood, an offering and the proper runic inscriptions carved into the dirt.

The creature directed the boy’s movements like a puppet-master, manipulating muscles with well-practiced ease. Soon, very soon, he would have a body of his own.

The gypsy child stood in the centre of a runic circle, spreading his dirty arms wide, clutching the bottle of wine he’d stolen earlier.

The boy opened his mouth and spat out words of power in a harsh, guttural tone, quite unlike his usual high-pitched voice. A second circle of runes, inscribed into the forest floor in front of him and over the rodent blood that had been spilled earlier, began to glow with red light. An unnatural wind whistled through the forest clearing, stirring leaves and ruffling the boy’s hair.

The air began to thicken slightly; there was a distinct smell of ozone. Smoke appeared from nowhere in the empty circle, slowly growing and congealing.

Then the demon appeared. It was humanoid, standing two metres tall, but made of darkness; it was as though someone had found a piece of the night sky devoid of stars and cut a man-shaped section of it out. Two pinpricks of hellish light passed for eyes. There was no mouth. Any normal child, any normal human, would have turned and run, screaming, into the night. But not this boy, who was possessed by the creature..

“What do you want?” a voice boomed, from everywhere and nowhere.

“I want to make a deal with you,” the boy said in his unnatural rough voice.

“You are no normal child,” the demon observed, looking the boy over with the barest of head movements.

“True. I bring you an offering,” the boy tossed the bottle of wine at the demon, which caught it effortlessly in one midnight black hand.

“Wine. Good quality. Very well, I will hear you out. State your business.”

“I want you to make me a body.”

Ooo
ooooooooooooO

The Shrieking Shack lit up in a burst of fire as the flame-robed figure apparated inside, Sirius flung over his shoulder. The hooded man quickly crossed the dirty floor and deposited his cargo gently on the ancient bed, cringing at the amount of dust that was thrown into the air.

He waved his wand up and down his robes, muttering a complex incantation. The hood and magically-patterned robes vanished in lieu of a t-shirt and ragged jeans. Harry Potter stood in the shrieking

shack, blinking in the dusty air. He immediately bent over to examine Sirius more closely; there hadn't been much time to do so during the breakout.

Frankly, he looked like crap. When Harry had seen him for the first time, in the very same place they were now, he'd thought his godfather looked bad. Compared to Sirius' current condition he had been in the pink of health during that fateful meeting.

Sunken cheeks, ripped clothes exposing xylophone-like ribs, stick thin arms, eyes with so much bruising from sleep-deprivation that he looked like he had some sort of skin disorder. Harry felt tears come to his eyes as he looked at his unconscious godfather. He didn't deserve this, he was innocent!

Somehow, catching Pettigrew didn't seem like such a good consolation after all when the Ministry was being so pig-headed about Sirius' release. Harry quickly checked his watch. It was two in the morning; he had plenty of time to sort out his godfather before returning to the Burrow. He had covertly stunned Ron before leaving; the last thing he needed was for his best friend to wake up for a toilet trip to find him missing.

"Enervate," he whispered, reviving Sirius. The man's eyes fluttered before snapping open, staring straight at Harry, who was bending over him with a look of concern.

"James?" Sirius rasped, his haunted eyes filling with wonder.

"Close. Try his son." Harry replied, wiping away a few rebellious tears. His godfather was alive!

"Harry? How...?"

"Take it easy. I've busted you out of that hellhole. Don't ask me how; I'll talk to you about it tomorrow. For now you just need to sleep. You're in the Shrieking Shack."

Sirius just nodded, dumbfounded. His breath was coming in short gasps, and he couldn't take his eyes off of Harry.

"You have her eyes..." he began, his voice quavering.

"So I've heard. I'm going to get you some food now, so try and get some rest. I'll be back at around the same time tomorrow."

"I'll be waiting... Harry..."

Harry made sure Sirius was comfortable, raised his hand in salute, and disappeared to scrounge some food from the Burrow. When he arrived in Mrs Weasley's kitchen, the tears were flowing freely down his face.

Ooo
ooooooooooooO

"A body?"

"I need a body. I'm just possessing this pathetic frame for the meantime; I require something more... permanent."

"I can make a vessel for you to inhabit. It will cost more than this offering."

"How much more?" the boy replied uncertainly. The creature didn't want to have to give up too much in exchange for a body.

"Your soul, undamaged and whole. To be delivered to us upon your death."

The creature appeared to consider the demon's offer carefully. It was all academic, really, seeing as he had a cast-iron way to cheat the otherworldly denizen.

"I accept." There was a burst of light in the clearing, like a bright firework had exploded at ground level. The demon nodded slowly.

"I will begin. You may watch. This will take a long time."

Ooo
ooooooooooooO

Harry moaned incoherently as his magical alarm went off at the usual early time the next morning. He wondered for a moment why he was so tired, before the events of the previous night (or earlier that morning, depending on how he looked at it) hit him in a rush. He had broken into Azkaban in a ridiculous disguise and freed Sirius. And, one of the best things of all, he'd discovered that he was free of the magical Trace. After casting a few test spells outside the Burrow's boundaries without the Ministry swooping down upon his head, Harry had realised that his magical core was registered as twenty-two, rather than nearly thirteen.

And he hadn't been caught breaking Sirius out. He cracked a grin and sat up, all vestiges of lethargy lost in the thrill of his own brilliance. Ron groaned in his sleep and rolled over again. Harry had subtly revived him from magical stasis upon his return, but the stunner would mean Ron would be sleeping in today. When Harry had got back to the Shrieking Shack, Sirius had been fast asleep. Leaving a note promising that he would visit his godfather later, Harry had returned to his bed.

After he'd got dressed, Harry set out for his morning run, which was becoming like second nature to him. It also provided an excellent opportunity to reflect and plan his next moves. The original timeline was as good as gone; it would be truly diverted from once the Horcruxes were gathered. Then Voldemort, if he did manage to return, would be in for a serious shock.

Dumbledore was going to be an irritation regarding Sirius, Harry knew. It would be all over the Prophet tomorrow, and then the shit would really hit the fan. The elderly Headmaster strongly disapproved of meddling with time, but Harry was prepared to start as he meant to go on. There would be repercussions to his actions, but once Voldemort was out of the picture Harry could deal with them.

There was nothing in the newspapers about an Azkaban breakout, which relieved Harry. He wanted to be able to talk to Sirius before Dumbledore caught wind of what he was doing. Ron was predictably

groggy over breakfast – he almost fell asleep in his scrambled eggs, much to Harry and Ginny's delight. The three of them fooled around on their brooms for most of the day while the twins visited friends.

Harry found himself easing back into the routine of being almost thirteen. He was able to make Ron and Ginny laugh more than before, and they hadn't noticed anything untoward about his behaviour. Hermione, he knew, was more perceptive about things like that, so he'd have to watch himself around her. All in all, however, he was enjoying his second chance to the full, even if there was a lack of mature conversation at times.

The sun set far slower than Harry wanted it to and, after an enjoyable dinner in which Percy was turned magenta by the twins' latest prank, the children were finally ushered off to bed. Harry muttered a goodnight to Ginny, who seemed much more collected around him. He set a magical alarm for midnight and lay awake waiting for Ron's characteristic snores. Once he was sure his friend was asleep, he stunned him again as he had the previous night. Then he went to sleep, scarcely able to wait to see Sirius.

"Harry! He's here! It's Him!"

Harry looked up from the remains of the Horcrux to see Hermione bursting through the door, a panicked look on her face. Ron came rushing down from the first floor of Godric's Hollow, his wand out and ready.

"How many?" Harry asked, although he already knew the answer.

"Too many. Anti-apparition warding has just gone up, and I think they're trying to-" Hermione didn't finish her sentence. Instead she paled and fell to the ground, her leg apparently trapped in the doorway of the cottage, despite it seeming unharmed. Harry could hear the shouts of Death Eaters as they began to batter down the makeshift defences Harry and Ron had rigged up upon their arrival.

"Hermione!" Ron yelled as he ran over to his fallen friend. "Hermione, speak to me!"

"My... my leg" Hermione muttered, obviously in pain. Harry was impressed at her ability to suppress the pain, but that turned to horror as he realised she was probably in shock. "I... I was trying to say they were activating the cottage's defences. I'm... trapped..." she trailed off and closed her eyes against the pain. Ron frantically ran his wand up and down her leg, but could find nothing physically wrong with it. Harry knew that the wards the Death Eaters used worked on the same principles as the Cruciatus Curse, despite being far less potent.

"Go..." said Hermione, gritting her teeth. "There's not enough time!"

"Bollocks to that!" shouted Ron angrily, still casting spells in an effort to free Hermione's leg.

"There is one thing you can do," Hermione whispered, motioning at her coat pockets. "In there, each of you take an item from my pockets. They might help free me."

Ron rummaged around, withdrawing two short polished metal rods. He tossed one to Harry and looked at Hermione for further instruction.

"I love you both," she said, before whispering the activation spell for the port-keys.

Harry awoke, sweating profusely. He hadn't had a bad dream since his first night after the time-turner accident; years of passive Occlumency had managed to keep the horrors at bay. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, reinforcing his mental shields until his heart-rate slowed to a normal level. Harry reasoned that the dream got passed his Occlumency because he had been tired the night before; he would have to be more careful when he went to sleep after visiting Sirius.

He checked the clock and found it was only a few minutes until his alarm was due to ring, so he quickly disabled it and the Silencing charms around his bed, eternally grateful that he no longer had the Trace on him. He quickly got changed into a baggy long-sleeved shirt and brown trousers; checked Ron was still stunned, and Disapparated.

[illegible]

“I will wait for as long as it takes” replied the boy. He was seated, cross-legged, in his circle. He hadn’t slept, ate or moved since the demon began to work; the host was expendable so maintaining it wasn’t high on the creature’s list of priorities.

[illegible]

“Harry, I... I think you need to do some explaining,” said Sirius once he’d released Harry. Harry gave his ragged-looking godfather the once-over to check for any injuries; finding none, he gestured for Sirius to sit on the bed while he drew up a battered chair from the corner.

“Start from the beginning, Harry. Where have you lived these twelve years? What house are you in?”

“My life is a story longer than you know, Sirius. I lived with the Dursleys for eleven years of my life, until I got my Hogwarts letter. Up till then, I had no idea what magic was or who my parents were.” Sirius made an outraged noise, but Harry continued. “I went to Hogwarts as nervous as I’d ever been. I quickly made two friends – Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. In my first year...”

Harry told the stories of his first and second years. Sirius was an excellent listener, knowing when to cheer and boo in just the right places.

“... And then I managed to free Dobby by tricking Malfoy into giving him a sock. And this is where the story gets strange, Sirius. Do you know anything about time-travel?”

“I know about Time-Turners, but they only go back a few hours and are bound to causality laws, aren’t they? To prevent meddling in the past?”

“Yes. But what if I was to say that in my third year, I heard that a convict had escaped from Azkaban, one Sirius Black?”

“... I don’t know quite what you’re talking about, Harry.”

“I’m not really the Harry you should know, Sirius. I’m twenty-two years old, stuck in my twelve-year old body. I had a time-turner accident... it’s a long story.”

“And one I need to hear, I think,” Sirius said firmly, looking very interested in what Harry had to say.

The night hours flew past as Harry told Sirius the abridged story of his previous life after his third year; Voldemort’s resurrection, Sirius’ own death, Dumbledore’s death, the fall of Hogwarts, the Horcrux hunt, losing Hermione... losing Ron... he skipped over most of the details, picking up the tale at the beginning of the Triwizard Tournament.

“Well,” said Sirius when Harry finished telling him what Dumbledore had said to him before he’d planned to rescue his godfather, “that’s...

that's quite a tale, Harry. And you say Minerva, Remus, Dumbledore and... Snivellus know?" Harry snorted at Snape's nickname. He used the distraction to discreetly wipe his eyes. The retelling had been hard.

"Yes. And don't be so antagonistic towards Snape; he's a greasy git, but hating him won't help matters."

"I'll try, Harry, I really will. So 'Trixie killed me... I don't know how I could have been so stupid! Taunting in the middle of a high-stakes duel... I should have seen it coming."

Harry nodded grimly. "But you, and I, have been given second chances Sirius, whether by divine providence or pure dumb luck. And I intend to make everything go as it should have done this time around."

"So how did you manage to rescue me from that hellhole the Ministry calls a prison? All I know what that the Dementors went crazy and rushed off down the corridor, the wall exploded, and I woke up here."

"That's another long story..." Harry yawned, looking at his watch. He had plenty of time to get back to the Burrow, but he'd been talking to Sirius for longer than he thought. "But I have enough time to tell it, so make yourself comfortable. I spent two days reading up on the Patronus charm in some old spell-books Bill had, to see if there were any variants of it. I discovered one which attracted Dementors rather than drove them away; it worked by emulating human emotion rather than creating one the Dementors can't feed off. I think its how they round up rogue Dementors, as I can't see many other practical uses for the spell. Anyway, I flew up to the ward-boundaries around the place on one of the Weasleys' old brooms, conjured myself a distinctive outfit, and let rip with a few of the modified Patroni. The Dementors flocked to the opposite side of the prison and I just rushed to get you. Sorry about blowing the wall up; I was so afraid I'd hurt you, but you turned out to be fine in the end. Apparating out was easy enough – the wards around your cell were destroyed by the explosion so it was a piece of cake."

"It was a shock to the system, seeing the same wall you look at every day demolished in a flashy explosion."

"I aim to please," Harry smirked, "and count yourself lucky I didn't decide to prank you. You were an easy target while you were unconscious."

Sirius smiled the first smile he'd cracked in twelve years. Harry leaned over to the bed and hugged his godfather. After what seemed like an age, they broke apart.

"You should go, Harry. You don't want Molly to catch you." Sirius chuckled.

"Should I bring food for you?"

"I can get it myself, as Padfoot. That night's sleep was the best thing I've had in twelve years. There's a way out of the Shack so I can just run from there to Hogsmeade."

"Alright. I'll check in on you a few days," said Harry before saying his goodbyes and disappearing back to a warm bed.

He just had to remember to revive Ron...

Chapter 7 – Unforeseen Consequences

“Harry! You have to see this!” called Fred and George in unison as Harry entered the kitchen for breakfast. His morning run had been shorter than normal, owing to his exhaustion from the previous late nights. Ron had been complaining of a headache when Harry had gone to take a shower, making him feeling guilty for stunning his friend.

However, he reminded himself, desperate times call for desperate measures. And Harry had endured many a Legilimency-induced headache in his time, so he thought Ron could take one for the team just this once.

“Sirius Black’s escaped, Harry!” Fred said, throwing the Daily Prophet into Harry’s arms as he sat down for breakfast. Ginny and Ron had yet to appear, so Harry decided to read about his little escapade in Azkaban. I hope they got my good side, he thought with a suppressed smirk. The headline, in the largest letters Harry had ever seen printed, screamed the news:

Sirius Black Escapes!

Azkaban’s security under scrutiny

By Wilfred Beckwood, Security Correspondent

Last night Azkaban fortress was the site of one of the largest scandals to hit the magical world, as your faithful reporter can reveal. The Ministry announced just last night that Sirius Black, infamous mass murderer, has escaped from Azkaban, making him the first prisoner to break out of the previously-impregnable fortress.

Black, who was incarcerated for the murder of... Harry skipped over the usual rubbish regarding Sirius’ ‘crimes’ until he got to the details of the breakout.

The Ministry released details of the escape in the press conference last night, saying that an accomplice was involved. When confronted by a brave guard, the cold intruder made vicious threats before

causing damage to the prison and escaping with Black. The Ministry also saw to release some security footage of the break-out, although audio was withheld. Currently the identity of the intruder is unknown, but an investigation is underway.

Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, was unavailable for comment.

Harry glanced at the accompanying monochrome (he was slightly disappointed; it ruined the impact of his costume) image. It showed him, dressed up, sitting on the rubble next to Sirius' prone form, flipping his wand over and over on a loop. He nearly snorted into his bacon when he read the caption: "The mysterious figure people are calling 'The Phoenix'".

Dumbledore was going to have an aneurysm.

"What do you think, Harry? Sirius Black! This is huge!" George practically shouted as he reached over the table for some butter.

"Who is this Sirius Black person? It says here he's a killer, but why is this such big news?" said Harry, feigning ignorance. He remembered that he hadn't actually known Sirius had existed until he saw the Muggle news report in his third year.

"You don't know who he is?" the twins exclaimed. "He's only one of the biggest mass-murderers ever! Mum said-"

"What did I say?" Mrs Weasley snapped as she walked into the cramped kitchen, a look of suspicion on her face.

"Nothing," said Fred, trying to put an innocent look on his face and failing spectacularly. "Did you read the Prophet, Mum?"

"Yes, dear... yes I did," sighed Mrs Weasley. "And I don't want you children staying out after dark, now that Black is loose! And he escaped from Azkaban, Merlin knows how, so no funny business from you lot," she snapped, changing mood abruptly. "He's a dangerous criminal, who knows where he is now. You need to stick to curfews your father and I will set."

Harry hid his frown behind the Prophet. Wormtail had a lot to answer for. He was spared having to listen to further disparaging remarks about his godfather, however, by the arrival of a tousled-haired Ron. His best friend lurched into the kitchen as he had done nearly every morning of the holiday, clad in his pyjamas.

“Morning,” he yawned, piling a ridiculous amount of food onto his plate and not looking at anyone through his bleary eyes.

Mrs Weasley took one look at the amount of food her youngest son was preparing to eat, sighed, and walked over to the stove. Harry stretched out his legs under the table and stretched his arms out languidly. These last few days, barring the nightmare he had had, had been excellent. He had felt revitalised, energised. In fact, while attacking Azkaban, Harry had noticed a significant increase in his magical power level; he was planning to ask Dumbledore for thoughts on the matter after the old man had calmed down over Sirius’ escape.

Just then the fireplace, which had previously been crackling away merrily, flared green and the head of Albus Dumbledore appeared in it, something which Harry had been expecting.

Dumbledore did not look happy. His lined face seemed to freeze the air around it, his brow etched with disapproval. His blue eyes, normally the source of comfort and reassurance, radiated cold fury.

“Good morning, Molly,” he said congenially, in total contrast to the look on his face. His eyes searched around the kitchen and landed on Harry, who tried to look nonchalant. “Can I borrow Harry for a moment? I’m terribly sorry to interrupt one of your famous meals, but if you have read the headlines this morning I’m sure you will not begrudge me a moment of his time.”

Mrs Weasley went slightly pink at the praise for her meals. “May I ask why, Albus?”

“As I said, I assume you saw today’s Prophet, Molly?” said Dumbledore quietly, and comprehension dawned on Mrs Weasley’s face. She gave Dumbledore a sharp nod and motioned for Harry to go into the fireplace.

"See you guys in a minute," Harry muttered as he stepped into the Floo, ignoring the curious looks on their faces. "Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office!"

The Headmaster's office in Hogwarts whirled into view as Harry was once again dumped onto the rich carpet in front of the fireplace. He got to his feet as quickly as he could and saw Dumbledore sitting behind his desk. The portraits on the wall were giving him stern looks, telling him that this visit was not going to be pleasant.

"Harry. Sit down," Dumbledore said, his usual friendliness conspicuously absent. As Harry sat in a chair facing the desk, Dumbledore took out a copy of the Daily Prophet and placed it onto his ornately carved desk, next to a curious puffing instrument. Harry was surprisingly unaffected by Dumbledore's attitude; he was thinking of how far he could push the man until he snapped. He knew he was being childish, but frankly payback would be sweet.

"Care to explain the meaning of this article, Harry?"

"Haven't the foggiest, Headmaster."

"Harry, please do not try my patience this morning. Could you please explain why Sirius Black has been mysteriously broken out of Azkaban by a caped villain mere days after I ask you not to help him?"

"I honestly couldn't tell you, Headmaster," Harry replied, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. It was satisfying to see the Headmaster so grave. Harry knew what the man was going through; Dumbledore had made him feel exactly the same.

"Don't try and play the fool, Harry!" Dumbledore shouted, bringing his hand down flat onto his desk with a bang. Harry jolted, and instantly knew he had gone too far. Dumbledore's eyes were blazing blue fire, his ancient frame almost glowing with power. Harry looked Dumbledore in the eye.

"I broke Sirius Black out of Azkaban,"

"Why?" Dumbledore said asked, not taking his hand off of his desk.

"He's been in there for twelve years, and he's innocent. Fudge, the incompetent, arrogant, ignorant fool that he is, won't release him despite the fact that we have Pettigrew. I wanted to go after Fudge and persuade him, but I decided that freeing my godfather was the easiest course of action." Harry spat bitterly, breaking the eye contact.

"And you didn't, for one moment, consider the implications that this would have on the timeline you've experienced? Harry, I am strongly against meddling with time. You have essentially forced me to see your point of view, to agree to take orders from you. Yet, when I ask you one thing, one thing to give me enough time to secure Sirius' release, you go behind my back and cause my plans to come tumbling down. I was planning to visit Amelia Bones this very afternoon, yet I doubt she'll listen to my claims now."

"I considered the implications, Headmaster. The timeline has deviated too far already, whether I meant it to or not. We still have a significant advantage; Voldemort is still incorporeal, we have Sirius, we know where most of the Horcruxes are, and I know who the main Death Eaters are."

"That is not the point." Dumbledore snapped, putting both hands onto the desk, his half-moon glasses falling down his crooked nose. "The point is that you seem to be unable to understand simple English or act your age, which makes it difficult for me to treat you as an adult. You have just come back from the future, I can accept that. I even did not begrudge you commanding my staff and my organisation in the pompous manner you did. But I am not going to wave this issue away. You have been nothing but immature and arrogant since your return. Even now you attempt to aggravate me."

"I'm sorry, Headmaster, are you trying to make a point? All I hear is you insulting me," Harry hissed.

"My point is that you cannot continue like this. You are an unknown quantity in the war that is brewing, and you I am trying my best to help you. The stage of life that your body is in at the moment is, I fear,

effecting your decisions, coupled with you seeing everyone who you thought was dead and the understandable euphoria that is attached to this. Despite this, you must not defy my orders; I like to think I have more information on subjects than you do.”

“Or are simply more manipulative.”

“Think that if you want, it does not change things. Fudge is suspicious of you and I and you breaking Sirius out of Azkaban and has started investigating us. The DMLE cannot help us clear Sirius’ name now, not even if I dumped Pettigrew into the Prophet headquarters. You have damaged our cause significantly in that respect.”

“And you damaged ours in several ways in the previous timeline – don’t try to make out that you’re perfect. You hired a defence teacher with Voldemort on the back of his head!” Harry retorted, sitting forward in his chair.

“I am not that man, Harry, although I admit my mistake with Professor Quirrel. We are defined by our choices, and I have not made those choices this time. I admit, it sounds like I chose what was easy over what was right, but I must stress that I am not that man, that Albus Dumbledore. You see me as him, and you must get past your prejudices to have a hope of functioning normally in this world. You cannot judge someone for something he has not done yet, whether he is me or a potential Death Eater,” said Dumbledore, readjusting his glasses with a tired air.

Harry remained impassive, now staring resolutely at the carpeted floor. The portraits on the wall had begun to whisper amongst themselves, but Dumbledore silenced them with a look.

“I... Headmaster... I’m sorry.” Harry muttered through gritted teeth. Dumbledore was right. He was always right, in his own infuriating way. But that didn’t mean it was easy to admit that fact. He still harboured some anger towards his headmaster in the back of his mind, but Harry knew cooperation was the key. His maturity had wavered since he had come back, abandoned in the face of his newfound situation. He needed to look at the situation pragmatically and set aside his

issues with the Headmaster, who wasn't even the Dumbledore he had problems with.

"I accept your apology fully, Harry, and that is all that I ask for. What's done is done, and I admit that I was beginning to believe a break-out was the only option to save poor Sirius, what with Cornelius being as stubborn as ever. I think I was a mite short-sighted going to him first, in hindsight. And I must say I enjoyed your choice of costume." Dumbledore sat down and absent-mindedly grabbed a yellow sweet from a bowl on his desk, his anger from before completely absent. "Sherbet Lemon?" he asked.

"I'm fine, thank you." Harry replied, suppressing a smile. "Headmaster, I... I need to think a bit about what you just said... you're right, I can't simply judge someone on something they did in the previous timeline but..."

"I understand my dear boy. You have endured what no-one should have endured... and I feel I owe you a sincere apology, despite what I just said. I may not have personally wronged you as my... previous self had, but if it makes you feel any better, I'm sorry."

Harry nodded silently and didn't press the matter. The pair of them sat in companionable silence, Harry examining a carving on the side of Dumbledore's desk and Dumbledore fishing for sherbet lemons. Finally, Harry broke the silence, trying to steer the conversation away from what they had just discussed.

"How is the Horcrux search progressing, sir?"

"Most excellently, Harry," Dumbledore said, his mouth full of sherbet lemon, his tone back to be one of a jovial grandfather. "We will be ready to strike within days. The location of Gryffindor's wand has not yet been pinpointed, but I'm sure with your knowledge and the Order's talent, we will be able to find it in the end."

"Good...good," Harry replied absently. "Sir, I need to ask you something. When I was... at Azkaban... I found I was stronger than I was before."

“Ah, yes, I had anticipated something of that nature. You see, Minerva and I put great thought into the physical and magical impact on you from the time travel. It would appear that, when you travelled back, your soul and magical core were what was transported. The Harry that inhabited this timeline was not ‘killed’ per se, more forcefully assimilated. I would have hypothesised some form of consciousness-melding, but that doesn’t seem to have been the case. Now, while this is completely unexplored territory, I think we have come up with an accurate conclusion as to what is going to happen.”

Harry nodded at Dumbledore, wanting him to continue. “Physically, you should experience puberty significantly earlier than before, most likely starting this holiday and ending far quicker than a normal boy of your age, for example two years as opposed to three or four. Your voice will break earlier; you will begin to shave earlier than you did before, for example. Your muscle mass and stamina will also be above average, but conditioning will be needed to exploit this. Magically... well, we are essentially guessing. My prognosis is that your magical core has ‘fused’ somewhat with the original Harry’s, making you stronger than you were before. How strong exactly were you before, may I ask? Severus is going to be evaluating you in the coming days, but I want to have an idea of what he’s getting himself into.”

Harry grinned at what the Headmaster was implying. “I could duel Voldemort into a standstill; not beat him, but make him retreat. As for Death Eaters, I could wipe the floor with them one-on-one, but in groups of more than eight was difficult. I can do good wandless magic, but it can’t compare to the stuff I can do with a wand. My magical knowledge is primarily defence and offence; I was always useless at household charms and things like that,” he finished with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. Hermione had always done those charms.

“Most impressive... I will obviously have to wait for Severus’ conclusion, he is more experienced than even I when it comes to the field of offensive spell casting, but it sounds as though your capabilities would equal or even outstrip my own if we duelled. This, at the risk of sounding immodest, is no mean feat, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

Harry's mouth opened slightly in shock; he closed it as soon as he realised and cleared his throat.

"Well, sir. That's certainly good to know. I think I should be getting back to breakfast now, you can send letters via Fawkes if you need to contact me further," he nodded, rising from his chair and giving the Headmaster a warm smile. However, as he crossed the room to the fireplace, Harry felt a spike of pain strike his skull and fell to the ground, screaming and clutching at his scar. Blood trickled between his fingers as Dumbledore dashed to his side.

"Harry? Harry! Can you hear me?"

"It is done," intoned the demon. Harry felt his pulse quicken to a frenzy, unnaturally fast in his thin body. In his mind he felt something... cold... pressing against the back of his eyes. His view blurred... shifted slightly, until he was watching what was happening from a detached viewpoint. His scar pain dulled to an ache, throbbing against his 'head'

A small boy, dressed in dirty, foreign-looking clothing, was sitting in a small circle of strange runic symbols. The look on his face was of indescribable delight, the sun was shining off of his hair. Harry turned his 'head' with no small amount of effort and saw that the boy was looking at... essentially nothing. Just another circle with a bottle of wine in front of it. The ground inside the second circle was moving... it was being disturbed by something inside it, something which seemed to be invisible.

"You're finished?" the boy said, getting to his feet. The temperature dropped several degrees, and Harry shivered despite having no body to speak of.

"Revoke the summoning, human, and you will take possession of your... gift," boomed a voice that had no source. The gypsy boy in the clearing muttered something under his breath which Harry didn't hear, and then the world exploded.

Light. Heat. A roar of sound, a piercing scream, the smell of burning flesh...

The light faded... Harry looked around from his vantage point above the clearing, which was now reduced to an apocalyptic barren of charred leaves and disturbed earth. Only the runic circles were intact, the grass inside them almost laughably stark against the blackened ground around them.

The boy was nowhere to be seen, the wine bottle had similarly vanished.

Fresh pain lanced through Harry's forehead; he couldn't even grab at his scar to soothe the pain... it was worse than he'd had in years... Occlumency couldn't help him, no one was there to ease the suffering...

Laughter echoed throughout the clearing, cold and deep. Harry felt something he hadn't felt so strongly in years clutch at his heart.

Fear.

The air in the middle of the circles distorted... warped. A buzzing sound started up in his ears, getting steadily louder. It filled Harry's hearing, began to almost blind him with its intensity...

It stopped. A man appeared in the clearing. His black hair, shoulder length and sleek, hung like a curtain over an aristocratic face. His features were refined, handsome. He stood tall and broad, the kind of man who could charm one minute and intimidate the next. He was perfect in almost every way... save for his eyes, which were like chips of obsidian.

They were like pits of fire, portals into eternity. They stared through you, almost performing Legilimency with a glance.

They spoke power.

The man looked down at himself and admired the black, expensively cut robes he was wearing. He appeared to be slightly out of breath; a

flush tinged his cheeks and the rising and falling of his chest was laboured. He withdrew a thin piece of wood from his pocket, and smiled a cold smile.

Next he rolled up his sleeve, revealing an ugly blemish on an otherwise-perfect forearm. A black skull with a snake coming out of its mouth.

The Dark Mark.

Lord Voldemort was back.

“Harry! Harry, wake up! Enervate! Recro!” Dumbledore’s voice was shaking slightly as Harry writhed in his grip. It had been five full minutes since the boy had collapsed, and Dumbledore was beginning to get frantic. High powered revival counter-curses were having no effect, and he couldn’t stop Harry’s scar from bleeding, nor stop the boy from screaming intermittently. The boy’s face and front was covered in blood and Dumbledore repeatedly had to perform cleansing charms on his own hands and wand.

Just as he was about to give up and call for help, Harry awoke with a howl. His scar stopped bleeding and Dumbledore hurriedly cast a cleansing charm before lifting Harry back into the chair in front of his desk.

“Harry, are you alright? Can you hear me?”

“Al... Albus? Is that you?” Harry sad groggily, his eyes unfocused.
“Albus... I saw him...”

“What did you see, Harry? Has this happened before?”

“Scar... saw what he was doing... Voldemort...”

“Tom? You saw Tom?”

Harry shook his head, to clear his vision. “Voldemort, I saw him, Albus. He... he had possessed some kid and done some ritual...”

runed circles in the ground. There was a voice... a loud one; I couldn't see where it was coming from..."

Dumbledore felt the temperature in his office drop ten degrees. A demonic summoning, it had to be.

"Then there was an explosion... he was in a forest clearing somewhere, the place was totally wrecked after that. Burned plants, messed up earth, whatever it was did a number on the place. Anyway... then my scar hurt, more than it has in years, and I heard this buzzing noise..."

Dumbledore practically clutched at his heart. Voldemort had attempted, and succeeded, in a demonic summoning. How? Tom would have had to give up his soul... unless... Horcruxes...

"And then this man appeared. He didn't look anything like the Voldemort I remember, he was tall and handsome, while the Voldemort I knew was more like a snake..."

"Tom Riddle," breathed Dumbledore, his eyes shadowed. "You saw what Tom Riddle would have looked like had he not transformed himself using the Dark rituals he performed in your fourth year."

"He's back then. Ahead of schedule," Harry said bluntly.

"It would seem so. He appears to have used a demonic summoning, though how he managed to perform one in his wraith form I do not know..."

"I'm back in this world, and I'm far stronger than I was before," Harry mused, "I reckon it was the increased strength connection through my scar; it focused him, gave him the energy necessary to perform the summoning... as well as inadvertently break through my Occlumency shields to let me see it. Well, I see a solution to this problem already." Harry got to his feet and withdrew his wand, causing Dumbledore to take a step back from the chair and draw his own.

"Harry, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to Apparate to Albania, Headmaster, and beat Voldemort to within an inch of his life, and then beyond it," he snarled.

"Harry, no." Dumbledore commanded, magic filling his voice as he appeared to visibly grow. "Stop this nonsensical talk. You cannot face Tom now; you still have to adjust to your new body's physical limitations, let alone your new magical ones. Not to mention the fact that you've just be subject to a Legilimency attack, however intentional or unintentional it was on Tom's part. You'll be killed."

Harry stared at the wall directly above Dumbledore's head, evidently fighting an internal struggle. "Alright," he muttered, putting his wand away. "We still have the upper hand, but our plans are going to need to accelerate. And I'm quite alright, Albus. I've dealt with Legilimency attacks before. Now... we don't know what powers this new body of his has... You said it was a demonic summoning?"

"Yes. Tom invoked the powers of a demon in exchange for his complete soul; however he doesn't actually have one so I would guess the deal is technically void, but the demon was unaware. Tom will recall his Death Eaters at the earliest opportunity and probably attack somewhere high-profile, to announce his return."

"He didn't do that last time, he worked behind the scenes," Harry interjected.

"This isn't last time, Harry. Voldemort may well forgo the subterfuge he used last time; he is much better shape to persuade people the way you claim he looks. Tom Riddle was always a charmer; Voldemort can do the persuasion of various Dark creatures himself instead of having to rely on the Death Eaters."

"I see your point, but this changes nothing; we still have the upper hand. You will need to reform the Order of the Phoenix as quickly as you can and try and place members at high-profile locations. However, I should inform you that the Phoenix is planning a trip to Knockturn alley in a few days time, so try not to target him."

"Oh, really? What is this mysterious gentleman looking to acquire?"

“Strength and agility-enhancing artefacts - not dark ones if I can help it. I need to have the edge when it comes to combat; I can’t rely on my adult reflexes, especially now we have to step up our operation. Never fear, the Phoenix will pay for his purchases. He isn’t a thief.”

“I’m sure... Well, Harry, I have a busy night ahead of me. Tom will have to spend a day or so recuperating after the summoning revived his body; he will undoubtedly recall his Death Eaters when that happens.”

“So what’s stopping me going after him now? Surely now is the time to strike!”

“We haven’t done anything about the Horcruxes yet; for now we know where Tom is and what he is planning, we wouldn’t if you attempted to kill him and turned him back into a wraith. For now I will formally reform the Order and attempt to tell Cornelius that Voldemort has returned. We need the Aurors on our side. I will also step up our Horcrux plans.”

“Don’t keep your hopes up regarding the Ministry, Headmaster. Although, now you mention it, having Voldemort attack somewhere like Diagon Alley would be very useful in making the damned Ministry open their eyes about the situation.”

Dumbledore chuckled; Harry marvelled at how the man could keep calm at a time like this. “I’m sure Cornelius will resist my claims, but if all else fails I’m sure we can ask the Phoenix to pay him a visit.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t mind,” Harry replied. He bid the Headmaster goodbye, stepped into the Floo, and was gone in a whirl of flames. Voldemort weighed heavily on his mind, but he remembered something Hagrid had once said about accepting what came. On reflection, Hagrid had had a point.

Back in the Weasley’s kitchen breakfast was a sombre affair; it turned out that Mrs Weasley had filled the children in on what she thought Dumbledore wanted to see Harry about, namely that Sirius Black was Harry’s godfather and Harry hadn’t known. Harry had fended off questions from the Weasleys, claiming that he didn’t want to talk

about it. This had garnered much sympathy from Ginny, who seemed to want to talk to Harry as much as possible now, something which Harry found faintly annoying.

The rest of the day was taken up by Quidditch practice, which was now conducted under the watchful eye of Mrs Weasley. Harry, much to his friends' delight, had managed to persuade Mrs Weasley to use his money to buy her children new brooms; he said that he didn't want to freeload now he was living under their roof, and "what's mine, is yours." Mrs Weasley had promise to perform the transactions the next time they were in Diagon Alley. Harry was trying his best to secure the family's loyalty and trust for when they found out his secret; of course he would prefer that they didn't, but he couldn't bank on that. Buying them things was unsubtle, but effective.

Much fun was also had at dinner trying to discern the identity of the 'Phoenix'. Ron seemed convinced that it was Dumbledore, but couldn't come up with a motive for breaking 'mass-murderer' Sirius Black out of Azkaban. Harry's favourite was Ginny's suggestion that Snape had a hand in it; Harry had accidentally spat out his pumpkin juice all over Percy, who had graced his family with his presence for the first time in days. Suffice to say, Percy hadn't been best pleased.

When he went up to his room that evening, leaving Ron to tackle his fourth helping of potatoes downstairs, he found a letter on his pillow along with a phoenix feather. Intrigued, Harry opened it and read;

Dear Harry,

This channel of communication is secure, but one-way I'm afraid. The Order has been reformed; I only told Severus, Minerva and Remus of the precise source of my information regarding Voldemort's rebirth, as I didn't believe you would want your secrets revealed in such a casual manner. The identity of the Phoenix is only known to you, Sirius and me.

I am planning to contact Cornelius tomorrow, and Order guards will be stationed at key wizarding locations. We are also keeping tabs on suspected Death Eaters; Tom will make his move shortly, and it would help immensely if the Death Eaters all went to his side as he

would want; this way we can identify them much easier. Severus has agreed to take up his mantle as an Order spy, something for which we are all grateful.

We are also planning to keep tabs on the Prophecy, and I am planning to destroy the record of it at my earliest convenience; I expect Cornelius might grant me a pass to the Department of Mysteries during our meeting tomorrow, but if that fails I will simply have to use more creative means.

I will continue to correspond with you in this manner. If you need to talk to me, simply use the Floo. Molly will understand if you claim you want to talk about Sirius, who I discovered to be in the Shrieking Shack. I'm sure we will have much to talk about when I visit him tomorrow evening.

Yours faithfully,

A.D

Harry checked he was alone and quietly burnt the letter. Things were all going according to plan.

Chapter 8 – Going shopping

Tom Marvolo Riddle sat in the middle of the quiet forest clearing. On the outside he seemed to be sleeping, but internally he was a maelstrom of thoughts and power. He was planning to recall his faithful, or those who claimed to be his faithful. His brief jaunt with Quirrel the previous year had proved that many of the Death Eaters needed more than a brief reminder of who they were loyal to.

His plans that year had been thwarted by Potter. The boy hadn't seemed remarkable until he had touched Quirrel's flesh... Voldemort knew he would have to study that particular form of magic more. Especially if the boy could cause the damage he had caused to Quirrel with a single touch. His Mudblood mother had invoked some sort of protection, an avenue of magic which Voldemort had yet to explore. However, he doubted it would affect his new body, augmented as it was by the demon.

Abruptly he stood, brushing his hair out of his eyes. He had studied his features earlier and was pleasantly surprised; it would be far easier to conduct alliances and sway people with a human face. He had been told he was handsome; another thing to use to his advantage. He would have to be subtle at the beginning, and then let the world at large know he was back. Dumbledore would not be able to stop him this time, and there would be no... accidents like Halloween 1981.

He gently rolled up his sleeve and touched a tapered finger to his unmarked forearm, visualising the words that would cause his Marked followers to know their master was calling. It caused him no pain; he made sure only his followers felt that.

He stood in the forest, leaves whipping around him in the wind and the trees swaying softly. He could hear the soft cry of unknown animals somewhere out there, intermingled with the sound of his own breathing. Then, several minutes after he had called them, his servants began to arrive. Riddle remained motionless as the masked and hooded figures apparated near him, eerie nightmare figures in the evening light. The Death Eaters.

He studied them dispassionately; there was Malfoy, Yaxley, Rowle, the Carrows. More and more began to arrive, until there were roughly twenty figures in the clearing. Not enough, he thought to himself idly. Finally, when he was sure that they were all there, he cleared his throat.

The effect was immediate. The Death Eaters formed a circle, one or two trembling slightly. All of them wore bone white masks, some of them in states of disrepair. A glaring statement of disloyalty. Voldemort raised his head to them, noting the intakes of breath most of his followers had at his new appearance. He ignored them; the rituals may have scarred his original body, but this new one had all the power but none of the physical drawbacks. He felt like he could crush a mountain with a wave of his yew wand, which the demon had supplied for him from where it had been buried near Godric's Hollow.

"The Death Eaters." He said, his hard voice echoing around the clearing. There was a sinister quality to it, which made several of the Death Eaters shiver slightly. "You have come to my side, over a decade after I vanished. You were feared, respected, hated by the community you came from. You were powerful, you were infamous. Yet, when the man who gave you all this vanished, where were you? You did not come to my side, you did not seek me out. A sub-par defence professor was the only one loyal enough to aid me in my time of need. Why?"

A number of the masked followers were visibly shaking in terror now. One fell to his knees, bowing his head and whispering "Master... I am loyal..." over and over again, as though it would grant him mercy. Voldemort's lip curled in disgust. The pathetic display of cowardice ignited old hatred in his veins; weakness was anathema to him. He raised his wand and pointed it at the man's head.

"Yaxley, you seem overcome. Am I that remarkable to look upon?"

"Master... you are magnificent..." the man whimpered, staring directly at the ground and refusing to look at the wand aimed in his direction. Voldemort let him sweat it out for several tense seconds before moving his wand away and focusing it on another Death Eater, who immediately stiffened.

"You, Avery. You have a son at Hogwarts. You are also notably wealthy. Would it have been so hard to pay someone to try to find your old master, whom you swore eternal loyalty to?"

"Master... I tried my hardest..." the man spluttered, looking to his fellows for help that would never come.

"Lies!" Voldemort spat vehemently, seeing the falsehood in Avery's mind as though it were written on the man's forehead. "Crucio!" he barked, the curse slamming into Avery's chest and knocking him off his feet. The man screamed in agony, clawing at his robes and the forest floor, causing animals in the woods around to bolt in fear. Voldemort breathed deeply and shuddered slightly, savouring the power he forced into the spell, before ending the curse. Avery lay on his back, moaning and twitching, while the tension in the clearing rose several notches. Voldemort began to pace around the middle of the circle, throwing glances at random Death Eaters.

"All of you are unfaithful. You show your lack of loyalty by merely turning up in your fine robes, fresh from your mansions and country houses. The Lestranges... now they are an example of loyalty. They have suffered for nearly a decade in my service, not handed away their power like cowardly Mudbloods." Voldemort paused to spit on the ground. "I gave you everything, and you saw fit not to give me anything in return. Yet I have been reborn."

"Master... did this happen?" asked a Death Eater to Voldemort's right. He knew from the build that it was either Crabbe or Goyle.

"What makes you think you are privy to such information? Crucio!"

The huge man howled and fell to his knees, but Voldemort kept the curse on for a scant amount of time. He wanted to instil fear in the ranks, not damage his inner circle.

"Do not interrupt me. I have several plans to put into place. First alliances must be formed, contacts reestablished. But we must be discreet. It would not do for the Ministry to discover I have returned for the dead. Furthermore--"

He was cut off by the sound of an Apparition pop, and another black-robed and masked figure appeared outside the circle. His black, potions-stained hair marked him out to Voldemort. Severus Snape.

“Severus. You have decided to grace us with your presence.”

“My Lord, I had to deal with Dumbledore,” said the masked figure, squeezing into the circle. “He believes I am redeemed, but I am ever loyal to you.”

“Loyal, Severus? You attempted to stop me many times last year, not to mention your lack of action in the intervening decade.” Voldemort tightened his grip on his wand.

“Master, I knew you would return. I have been cultivating my position at the school, in preparation for this day. I can be your spy in Dumbledore’s court.”

“I see... Legilimens!” Voldemort hissed, angling his wand at the Potions Master. The pair of Death Eaters next to Snape shifted away as the man tensed and grunted in pain. Voldemort rotated his hand slightly and sent wandless bludgeoning curses at Snape’s head - he was not feeling charitable with regards to the amount of pain he would cause. He was only interested in seeing the truth. He flicked through Severus’ memories, lingering on some, skipping over others. Despite Voldemort’s doubts, the man’s loyalty to the cause shone like a beacon through them; he would be useful in combating Dumbledore and his followers. He halted the probe and gave Severus, who looked dazed, an approving nod.

“Welcome back to the fold, Severus. Now, as to the first steps we will take...”

Oooo
ooooooooooooO

“Hey, Harry! Letters from Hermione!” Ron yelled, waving for Harry to land. Harry turned, threw the Quaffle as hard as he could at Fred, who caught it easily, and gracefully descended.

It had been three days since he'd talked to Dumbledore, and Harry was beginning to get slight cabin fever staying at the Weasleys. They practiced Quidditch every day, and Harry was grateful to reacquaint himself with his (younger) old friends, but life was too sheltered there. Mrs Weasley was becoming slightly overbearing. Frankly, he was bored. There was only so much time one could spend around children of such an unequal age gap. Most of his energy was spent keeping up the pretence that he was twelve.

Dumbledore had kept him up to date on Order affairs (something which he had neglected to do the first time around, Harry reminded himself). Voldemort had recalled his Death Eaters the previous night; everyone from that night in the graveyard in the previous timeline had gone. Barty Crouch Jr. couldn't be accounted for, but Harry was sure that he was still imprisoned at the Crouch household, and had asked Dumbledore to confirm that. Order surveillance had stepped up as more and more old members flocked in; all the Death Eaters vanishing simultaneously, as had been observed, was as good an indicator as any that something was happening, whether they believed Voldemort was back or not. Snape had been scanned and accepted back, which was a relief; the Order still had their spy.

Fudge was being depressingly predictable. He flat out refused to believe Voldemort was back, or to give Pettigrew a formal interview. Harry wished that he could pay a visit to Pettigrew and 'force' him to confess; Dumbledore had been careful to conceal the traitor's location from Harry for that precise reason. Fudge was also being very careful with regards to Harry and Dumbledore, a response triggered by Harry's foolish actions in their meeting. He was on political thin ice.

"Phoenix sightings", much like the "Black sightings" he remembered from before, were now a daily occurrence in the Prophet; Harry found them to be a perfect way to start the morning after his run. There was nothing like a little humour over breakfast.

Harry was still waiting on Dumbledore to summon him for Snape's "analysis" of his abilities and magical prowess. He frankly had no idea what was in store, but knowing Snape it would probably be

unpleasant. Dumbledore had also arranged to have the Burrow's wards upgraded in light of Sirius' escape – or, rather, he used that as an excuse to upgrade them because of Voldemort's return. The Weasley parents had agreed wholeheartedly as they were both in the Order and knew the stakes; Harry had caught them glancing at him with looks of pity when they thought he wasn't looking, despite the fact that he 'didn't know' of Voldemort's return.

Dumbledore had also posted a small guard in the Department of Mysteries, like before, until the Prophecy could be safely disposed of.

"She's written one for Ginny as well, but I'll give that to her later," Ron said absent-mindedly as he tossed Harry his letter and ripped open his own. Harry sat down on the grassy verge overlooking the Burrow where they played Quidditch and opened his own letter.

Dear Harry,

How's life with the Weasleys? I delighted they got custody of you, I don't know why Dumbledore didn't do something like this a while back, but I assume he had his reasons. I'm on holiday at the moment, although I've tried to make a start on our summer homework.

I guess you've heard, but Sirius Black's escaped! He's some wizard mass-murderer who killed nearly a dozen people with a single curse – I've never heard of a curse being able to do that. Someone who looked like a Muggle superhero broke him out, with a ridiculous outfit et al – they're calling him the Phoenix. I hope he isn't in league with You-Know-Who, like the Prophet is saying!

I hope I see you all soon, I'm coming to the Burrow at the end of the holidays before we get our school equipment. Hope to hear from you soon, and try to get Ron to do his homework!

Love from,

Hermione

Harry scowled slightly at the disparaging comment about his costume, but made a mental note to write back to Hermione. He'd let the

costume comment slide this time... it wasn't as though she knew that he was the Phoenix. Anyway, just having her able to write to him rather than being killed at the hands of Death Eaters was enough to let him wave away any insult she threw at him. At least she was unlikely to be irritating through lack of maturity. He remembered what it was like not to be written to at all.

Ron seemed happy enough with what was in his letter and the two let the others know that they were heading back into the house in the hope of scrounging some early lunch. As the pair of them walked back, chatting merrily, an unexpected figure stood in the doorway.

"Blimey, is that Dumbledore?" breathed Ron, unconsciously straightening his t-shirt. A second figure exited the house. Ron's face contorted in horror. "And Snape! By Merlin's baggy underpants, why the hell is he here?"

Harry snorted with laughter at his friend's imaginative cursing. "Probably something about Black," he took care to say the name with a measure of disgust, "You know, I had to see Dumbledore a few times about it?"

"Oh yeah... bad luck about that, mate."

Harry nodded, looking straight ahead. He'd got word from Dumbledore that Sirius was happily recovering from his trip to Azkaban in the Shrieking Shack; Dumbledore was going to bring Lupin to meet him when he thought Sirius had recovered sufficiently. Currently only Dumbledore, Harry and Pettigrew knew of Sirius' innocence, and Fudge, it seemed, was doing his best to keep it that way.

"Harry, Ronald! I trust you're well?" Dumbledore beamed at the two boys once they'd arrived. Snape simply scowled from behind Dumbledore, giving them a look which said that he'd rather be ripping off his own fingers than spend one more moment in the Burrow.

"Potter. Weasley." He said curtly. Ron and Harry nodded back at him, not speaking. Dumbledore remained, or seemed to remain, perfectly oblivious of the animosity between the three and continued.

“We’ve come to the Burrow to pick up Harry.”

“Why?” Ron blurted out, and then fell silent at the look on Snape’s face in reaction to the interruption.

“‘Why’ is none of your business, Weasley, but I can see you won’t be able to bear not knowing,” Snape sneered. “The Headmaster wishes to talk to Potter about Black’s escape and the security measures he will have to submit to when out in public.”

“Quite right,” said Dumbledore. “I’ve already talked to Molly and she says as long as you’re back for lunch, we can go now. Have you got your wand, Harry?” he asked.

“Yeah. Just let me put my Nimbus away,” said Harry. He gave himself a quick once-over. His standard jeans and t-shirt outfit would no doubt be fine for any sort of physical test. Anyway, he wouldn’t be caught dead scrubbing up for Snape.

“I’ll take that for you, mate,” interjected Ron, leaning over to take Harry’s broom and whisper in his ear: “Don’t let that git push you around.” Harry suppressed a laugh and nodded before heading into the bustling kitchen with Dumbledore and Snape.

“We will be heading to one of the dungeons first, for the assessment,” Dumbledore muttered out of the corner of his mouth so that Molly wouldn’t hear. “Molly,” he said more loudly, “We are heading off now; Harry will be back shortly.” Mrs Weasley gave him a nod, a dark look on her face; she’d sensed that the meeting was not going to be just about Sirius, but she assumed that Voldemort would factor into the equation rather than a magical assessment.

Harry wished that all he had to deal with at that moment was Voldemort; who knew what Snape had dreamed up on the other side of that Floo journey?

He was snapped out of his reverie by the sound of Snape shouting his destination into the Floo; “Dungeon seven!” Harry had personally never been into that particular dungeon; it was largely unused,

according to the Marauder's Map. Dumbledore followed Snape promptly and Harry muttered a "Bye," to Mrs Weasley, who began to sniff emotionally as if on cue, causing Harry to have a flash of irritation at her lack of control. He was only going to Hogwarts!

"Dungeon seven!" he cried, throwing Floor powder into the fire and stepping through. Here we go again... Harry thought as he was spun into the sick rollercoaster ride that was Floo travel.

He emerged from the grate flat on his face as usual; just in time to avoid the pale blue curse that had been aimed where his head would have been had he arrived in the normal way. Harry swore and whipped out his wand, rolling to the side to avoid a second spell. He flipped onto his feet, stomach muscles protesting at the abuse they suffered, and turned to face his opponent.

Snape. He should have known the greasy git would dream up something like this. Nothing like an impromptu duel to test Harry's improved capabilities; Snape was in for one hell of a surprise. Dumbledore was standing calmly just outside the doorway, separated from the interior of the room by a shimmering green field of energy Harry knew was some kind of protective ward.

"Potter," snarled Snape, "It seems luck is on your side again. It won't be the next time you face the Dark Lord. You claim to have fought him before, so prove your worth."

Harry smirked annoyingly, attempting to rile up his opponent, and quickly scanned the room. It was a low-ceilinged empty classroom, with only a teacher's desk, sans chair, occupying the floor space. Dusty cupboards of ingredients lined the walls and torches flickered in their brackets at regular intervals.

"Diffindo," hissed Snape, starting the duel. Harry stood impassive, waiting until the last minute to deflect the spell with a simple Protego. His grandstanding would be a poor idea in a real duel, but he was confident that he could beat the Potions master, and making Snape angry would make him careless. Power was beginning to throb in his veins, filling him with energy.

He felt alive.

“Stupefy,” Snape tried again. This time Harry simply moved to the right a fraction; the spell whooshed past his ear and broke off a piece of the fireplace’s mantelpiece.

Snape’s face contorted into an ugly scowl. “Not going to fight back, Potter? You’re just like your father, and you’ll be dead like him too if-“

Blood roared in Harry’s ears as Snape made the slur about James Potter; his wand lashed forward like a snake, a thin blue cord scything out of the end and striking just below Snape’s guard. The man twisted to avoid it and his billowing cloak was torn almost in two by Harry’s non-verbal hex. Harry felt electrified, like every move he made spoke volumes. He immediately cursed himself for his lack of control; Snape always got under his skin, no matter how composed he was trying to be.

“Impressive, Potter,” Snape drawled lazily, resuming his position facing Harry from the middle of the room. “But I expected better, really, from someone who has boasted of your ‘achievements’...”

“Are you going to talk or duel, Snivellus?” Harry sneered, trying to goad his opponent into doing something rash. His efforts were rewarded when the blood drained from Snape’s face and the man fired off a silent Sectumsempra curse. Playtime was, it seemed, over.

Harry threw himself to the side, firing off a Bludgeoning hex as he did so. Snape deftly blocked the spell and sent another Sectumsempra in Harry’s direction; it narrowly missed the boy’s ear, cutting a deep gouge in the flagstone floor. Harry got to his feet as quick as he could, wincing at the closeness of the last spell, and threw up a Contego shield, a spell considered to be Auror-level. Snape raised an eyebrow and cast an orange hex at it; the spell struck the shield with a sound like thunder, causing absolutely no effect as it was absorbed into the shield’s scarlet threads. Harry winced at the impact, remembering that he wasn’t as physically strong as he used to be, and decided to go on the offensive.

“Confringo!” Harry yelled, charging at Snape head-on while maintaining his shield. The powerful blasting curse slammed into the Potion master’s hastily-conjured defences and launched him across the room onto the desk with a tumultuous crash. Harry deftly transfigured the desk to have oversized jaws and legs, causing it to buck and thrash trying to dislodge the dazed Professor on top of it. Snape rolled off of the insane piece of furniture and set it ablaze, causing the desk to run across the room into a wall and collapse in a heap of firewood. Snape then levitated the remains and sent them hurtling at Harry, who was slowly advancing on the man’s position.

Harry dropped his shield and swung a punch at the debris, shouting the banishing curse incantation as he did so. The desk was launched back across the room at a surprised Snape, who was hit in the stomach and sent sprawling.

Mobilicorpus, thought Harry as Snape tried to get up, suspending his least-favourite teacher by his ankle. Harry casually stretched out his left hand to wandlessly disarm his opponent, ending the duel as quickly as it had begun. He remembered at the last moment to charm Snape’s robes to stay up in the air; he had no wish to see what Snape was wearing underneath them. Snape twisted to look at Harry with an expression that would have caused most first-years to faint dead away.

“Just like your father to use such a spell, Potter. Arrogant to the core. You should have stunned me, lest I do this!” he stretched out his right hand and attempted to wandlessly summon his wand from Harry’s grasp. Harry rolled his eyes and retained the grip on Snape’s wand, despite the firm tugging on it. His knuckles were beginning to sting where he had punched the desk, but he daren’t take his focus off of Snape to heal them.

“Snape, do you have to continually insult me? We’re going to be working together, and it would be better if you didn’t act like a pre-teen, like you tend to claim I do.” Snape’s expression went, if possible, even darker, and Harry felt the wandless summoning plucking at his grip again. Rolling his eyes once more, Harry stunned Snape and then lowered him none-to-gently to the floor.

“Bravo, Harry,” said Dumbledore, who dispelled the wards on the doorway and entered, clapping slowly. “It seems you display above-average skills in duelling and raw magical talent, as I had suspected. The physical changes we hypothesised should happen in the coming weeks; it would seem everything is going according to plan. Now, if you would revive Severus, we can move onto the other reason I invited you here this morning.” Harry cast the counter-curse on his least favourite Professor and tossed the man his wand; Snape got to his feet, shot Harry a filthy look, and turned to the Headmaster, who Vanished the remains of the teacher’s desk with a flick of his wand.

“Are you quite alright, Severus?” Dumbledore queried with laughter in his eyes. “You took quite a hit from that desk. Incidentally, Harry, I think Minerva would have been quite impressed with that particular piece of Transfiguration. But I digress. Harry, we, by which I mean the Order, have recovered two of Tom’s Horcruxes; Marvolo Gaunt’s ring and Slytherin’s locket, both from the locations that you detailed in your letter. I have them locked up in my office, and was wondering if you could provide any clues as to how to eliminate them. I would have used the Basilisk’s venom from the Chamber, but I’m afraid you took care of it rather... thoroughly, shall we say.”

Ignoring Snape’s sneer of contempt, Harry thought back to how he had destroyed the Horcruxes in the previous timeline. Destroying a Horcrux was a case of magically damaging its casing until the soul can no longer physically inhabit it. Generally something powerful such as Basilisk venom was required, but spells such as Fiendfyre also worked.

“Headmaster, we will need more room than your office to destroy the Horcruxes; may I suggest we convene by the lake? You’ll probably need to distract Hagrid beforehand; I reckon he’ll notice when we destroy them.”

“Certainly, my dear boy. I will meet you there. Severus, if you would come with me to collect the Horcruxes.”

With that the pair of them strode from the room, Snape shooting Harry another look of loathing before he departed. The man really needed to learn how to lose graciously.

Ooo
ooooooooooooO

Several minutes later, Harry found himself standing on the shore of the Lake, sunshine beating down on his shoulders and back. He was sweating slightly, but it was nothing compared to Snape, who was sweltering under his black robes yet tried not to show it. Dumbledore, probably through use of expensive inlaid cooling charms, looked carefree and ignorant of the high temperatures around him. Before them the Lake glistened with a thousand sparks of sunlight, the waters as still and tranquil as a mirror. All that could be heard was the gentle lapping of imperceptible waves against the rocky beach on whence they stood.

“So, Harry,” said Dumbledore, placing the offending Horcruxes onto a conjured straw mat on the shore, “What do we have to do?”

Harry eyed the Horcruxes warily. When he and Ron had destroyed them the first time round, they had tried to speak to them, to turn them against each other. The pieces of soul inside them were insidious and cunning, as one would expect of the Heir of Slytherin.

“I suggest using Fiendfyre. You, Snape or I can cast and control it while the two who aren’t casting are on hand to douse the spell with lake water before it gets out of control.”

“Fiendfyre?” Snape asked, looking incredulous. “And since when did you know about destructive spells such as that, Potter?”

“Since I fought Voldemort’s followers on and off for five straight years after Hogwarts was destroyed, whereas you died rather quickly, as I seem to recall. I had to learn to defend myself in a situation like that,” Harry shot back. Dumbledore raised a hand to silence the pair of them.

“I will cast the Fiendfyre. Harry, Severus, I would suggest one of you using Aguamenti and the other levitating the lake water to douse the flames; the combination of magical and actual water will have a more

potent effect than one or the other alone. Should I aim to destroy both at once, Harry?" he asked.

"I would think so, Headmaster. I don't think they need to be attacked individually, although I should warn you that they'll speak to you before you cast the spell; be prepared for the soul fragments to try and turn you against us. One of them nearly got Ron; Hermione had to slap him to make him snap out of it."

Dumbledore chuckled and rolled up his sleeves in preparation. Snape and Harry moved behind the Headmaster, who was standing in front of the mat with the Horcruxes on. Snape primed his wand to levitate the water while Harry took careful aim for the water-conjuring.

"On the count of three. One... two... three... *Arcesso Fiendfyre!*"

The temperature shot up to unbearable levels as a roiling, flaming Chimera erupted from the end of Dumbledore's wand, brighter than the sun beating down on them. The Horcruxes were engulfed instantly, vaporised as soon as the unnatural flames came into contact with them. Harry heard small screams punctuate the crackling of the Fiendfyre as he shouted "*Aguamenti!*" while, at the same time, Snape non-verbally levitated a considerable portion of dirty lake water. Dumbledore snapped his wand up, breaking the connection with the tail of the fiery Chimera, and took a step back to allow Harry and Snape to douse it in water. The beast screeched as the water hit it and instantly boiled, sending gouts of steam into the air.

Eventually, however, it fell under the combined assault and vanished into nothing. The air temperature returned to normal, which was still uncomfortably hot, although Harry, Snape and Dumbledore were all now soaked with water, which cooled them down considerably. Harry quickly hurried towards what was left of the mat; a black square of ash.

"You got them sir, there's nothing left," he confirmed. Not that there was usually anything left where Fiendfyre was concerned. "We should probably have this section of turf uprooted and removed though; the taint can cause soil problems."

“You speak as though you’ve done this before, Potter,” said Snape, casting a quick drying charm on his hair, which had just received a rare washing.

Harry gave Snape a cold look which, for once, left the man silent. Dumbledore cast his own drying charm on his long hair and beard, making them look more presentable than they had when sopping wet. Harry revelled in the coolness of the water, not caring that his hair was sticking to his head. Dumbledore then cut out the turf Harry indicated with his wand and Vanished it, leaving a clean-cut square of bare earth beside the beach.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooO

Miles away, Lord Voldemort felt a small stab of pain at the base of his skull. He flinched slightly, then continued the note he was writing about his current plan, passing the pain off as nothing.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooO

“Two down then sir,” Harry announced as the three of them headed back up to the castle. “That means we have to find the wand and retrieve the Cup from Godric’s Hollow. Why, incidentally, did you not do that already?”

“Because Peter Pettigrew has not chosen to reveal the Secret he was entrusted with. We will have to use Sirius Black to enter Godric’s Hollow, and he can retrieve the cup.”

“Why don’t you just use Veritaserum on Pettigrew? Or let me see him...”

Dumbledore gave Harry a calculating look. “The Secret of a Secret Keeper must be given freely and with the Secret-Keeper under no magical coercion. Sirius, however, already knows the Secret, so he can enter Godric’s Hollow freely. Speaking of Sirius, I’m planning to have Remus meet with him and you this summer. Sirius is eager to

see you again, and he's nearly recovered from his ordeal in Azkaban."

"You mean physically, not mentally?" Harry questioned, knowing the answer.

"He will never recover mentally," conceded Dumbledore, "There will always be a bit of that injustice living with him. But, with time, having you and Remus close to him will heal those wounds. Cornelius is still refusing to see sense about the matter of Tom and Peter, but I hope to win him around in the end. Preferably before the Death Eaters start their attacks."

Snape cleared his throat and Harry snapped his head round, remembering something he had wanted to ask the man. "You must have been called to his side the other night. What happened?"

Snape scowled slightly at Harry's question, but spoke regardless. "The Dark Lord called me to his side, yes. After the introduction he moved to an area whose name was under the Fidelus, so I cannot speak of its location. He spoke of acquiring a familiar near the end, I feel this might be similar to the snake Nagini that you described. He neglected to explain exactly how he returned, only that his reign would be long and mighty. I believe he has sent out emissaries to the giants, vampires and werewolves--"

"Already? What is the Order doing about it?"

"If you'll let me finish, Potter, I will tell you. Hagrid is leaving tomorrow to rendezvous with the giants; we are fortunate in knowing their current location, something which the Dark Lord does not. The vampires will hopefully not cooperate en masse; even so, we have sent someone after the Dark Lord's messenger. The werewolves are essentially a lost cause; Greyback holds dominion over them and they follow his command."

"I intend to send Remus out, however, to try and persuade some of the lycanthropes to join our cause or, at the very least, not join Tom's," interjected Dumbledore. They had reached the castle entrance and were now heading up to Dumbledore's office.

"No good," said Harry, "The werewolves are too devoted, or scared of, Greyback. Remus will have a tough time of things, unless we kill Greyback first. Focus your resources on the giants; we could use some firepower when the going gets tough. This is war, sir, and whoever is not with us is against us. You said he wanted a snake, Severus?"

Snape scowled even deeper at Harry's use of his first name, "Yes. He claimed he had seen a suitable specimen in the Albanian woods while he was waiting for his powers to regenerate after he had been reborn. It will probably have a number of charms and irreversible enchantments placed onto it on it and be enhanced in size and venom potency."

"He'll then be turning it into a Horcrux as soon as he can..." Harry murmured to himself, as they reached the Headmaster's office and Dumbledore spoke the password.

"We can worry about Nagini, or whichever creature he finds, later, Harry," Dumbledore said, stepping onto the revolving stairs, "For now we need to focus on obtaining the cup. I am planning to take Sirius out to Godric's Hollow tomorrow afternoon. I believe Severus and I will be able to destroy it now that you have shown us the ropes."

Harry nodded, still thinking about Voldemort's potential familiar. He surmised that she would have to be dealt with at the same time as Voldemort, seeing as she was nearly always with him or nearby. Then he remembered his shopping plans for that evening, and knew what he would be spending his afternoon doing.

The Phoenix was going to have to be given a decent costume for his outing.

Oooo
ooooooooooooO

Albus Dumbledore watched Harry Potter disappear through the fireplace in his office with a heavy heart. The last week or so had been one of, if not the, more trying periods of his long life. Severus

Snape stood near the door, expecting to be asked to leave. Instead, Dumbledore waved him into the seat in front of his desk and summoned a glass of whiskey and two glasses. Having poured himself and his guest a drink, Dumbledore spoke.

“So, Severus, what do you think?”

Snape took a long sip and placed the crystal glass down on Dumbledore’s desk. “I don’t know Headmaster, I just don’t know. The boy has changed, I can see that much. When I, forgive me, tried to goad him during our duel, he didn’t respond how I was supposed to. He even said some things that,” his grip on the tumbler tightened imperceptibly, “were very effective in making me act rashly. The boy has obviously seen and experienced combat.”

“I am more afraid for his sanity. I haven’t told him the extent of his magical growth, but it is frankly astronomical. He won’t be magically gifted – no Seer powers, no multiple Animagus forms – but his raw power will be formidable. I can see him taking on Tom now and putting up a good fight once he has grown up a bit.”

“What of the future he has experienced? Didn’t he and the Dark Lord face each other then?”

“He has talked very little about the five years he spent on the run; he preferred to talk about our quest for Horcruxes. From what I can gather he used to be able to duel Tom effectively, but lacked the power to finish him off.”

Snape took another drink and sighed. “I hate to say it, but the boy is talented in terms of duelling. What worries me most is his infuriating impulsive streak combined with raw magical power and a liking to rule-breaking.”

“I understand your concerns, Severus. Harry seems to be unstable when it comes to violence. In fact he seems to express a desire to hunt the Death Eaters personally. While this may benefit our cause, I dread to think of the spiritual toll it might take on him.”

"I think we can save the psychoanalysis of the Boy Wonder until it is needed."

Dumbledore laughed and refilled his glass. "Quite. Now, what have you heard of Tom's plans?"

Snape rubbed his left arm unconsciously before replying. "The Dark Lord has reformed the Death Eaters, and showed most of them his... displeasure at their apparent lack of effort when it came to looking for him. I was spared the most... forceful punishments bar a Legilimency scan, as I am "in with the old fool," as he put it."

"I see. Are you sure you want to spy again for us Severus?"

Snape whitened slightly and squeezed his glass tightly. "Until the end, Headmaster. I just hope Potter, from the future or not, will be up to the task."

"I can drink to that."

Ooo
ooooooooooooO

Harry lay back on his bed, sweating slightly. He had spent the best part of an hour locked in Ron's bedroom carefully constructing a costume with the help of one of Bill's old Rune books. He had taken an unobtrusive, pocket-sized rock from the Burrow's garden and carved, with reference to the book, the runes of containment and releasing. From there he had created a hybrid of a transfiguration and a glamour, which could be stored and released from the stone with an activation word. The Weasleys had thought that he was in bed with a stomach ache, but he thought that this was a much better use of his time than having dinner with them. The spell-work itself was sixth and seventh year material; the only thing he had needed help with was actually binding it to the rune stone, which thankfully Bill had studied as a Curse-Breaker.

When he had emerged from the Floo just before lunch, he had arrived to see the Mrs Weasley, Ginny, Ron, Fred, George and Percy sitting solemnly at the kitchen table. It had transpired that Mrs

Weasley had told them what she knew, as a member of the Order, of Voldemort's rebirth. Harry had pretended that that was what Dumbledore wanted to talk about with him, and accepted their sympathy with good grace. Who were they to know that he was going to be blowing that very same Dark Lord to smithereens at the first opportunity? Their compassion felt almost alien to him; it had been a long time since he had had people care about him as opposed to hunt him. Thinking about it now brought a pang of guilt about how he had treated the Weasleys; stunning Ron (although his friend hadn't known it) and sneaking around behind their backs as he was now. That said, it was for their own good. No one but him was going to be hurt this time, and if the Weasleys thought they were going to protect him they were sorely mistaken about who would be doing the protecting.

Security at the Burrow had been arranged to be upgraded the following morning, and Mrs Weasley had forbidden Harry to go running alone. He had compromised by running around the Burrow's garden a few times; it was the same distance and frankly a lot easier than the forest path. After a few more rounds of Quidditch he had faked illness and gone to bed to create the costume. Mrs Weasley was convinced he wasn't eating enough which led to illness, or some such rubbish, but Harry had tried to ignore her comments.

"Vestum," he muttered while grasping the warm stone in his hand. There was a brief flash of light which shone between his fingers and the transfigurations began. Harry's arms and legs made a grinding sound and lengthened slightly, making him a few inches taller. His clothes changed to become a tight-fitting dark red shirt and trouser combination. A cloak materialised around his shoulders; it was a lighter shade of red with a more prominent peaked hood than the previous costume, making Harry's shadow look similar to a bird. The trim of the cloak were dancing flames and on the back a black phoenix emblem was emblazoned. He had tried to make himself look slightly more subdued and threatening this time round; honestly, a cloak that looked like flames had just been plain stupid. His glasses were disillusioned at the end of the transformation, and magically affixed to his face.

Wincing slightly from the transfigurations, which currently caused sharp stabbing pains in his limbs, Harry got up, looked in the mirror, and gave a twirl. His face was completely hidden in shadow, but he felt that something was missing. What if the hood fell down in a fight? He ended up adding a mask to the ensemble, not unlike the one from his Azkaban trip. It was, however, more of a bandana which encircled his nose and mouth. Then, with a tap of his wand, Harry cast a final glamour over his distinctive scar, covering it from view and bound that final transfiguration to the stone.

“Finite Incantatem,” he said, and the costume disappeared, leaving him as plain, short, 12 year old Harry Potter. Albeit a Harry Potter with much less fat and slowly defining muscles. Even so, he couldn’t wait for his early pubescence to kick in so that he could grow a bit. If he had it his way he would keep the leg and arm transfigurations on permanently, but they could cause his limbs to deform once his real growth spurt kicked in.

Now all he had to do was wait until after dinner to go and do his illicit shopping.

Oooo
ooooooooooooO

In the locker room of Heathrow Airport’s security, a man appeared. He was cloaked and hooded in a curious outfit, and had materialised out of thin air. Looking around furtively, the man took in his surroundings; a small, grey room with dark green lockers lining the walls and some glass cabinets at the back wall, containing firearms. The man looked up and saw a small camera situated directly above his head, looking over the room.

He withdrew a short stick from his pocket and tapped himself once on the head with it, causing him to turn invisible to an extent; it was almost as though light bent around him. He swiftly crossed the deserted area to the glass cabinet and muttered a word, causing the cabinet to spring open. He carefully browsed the weaponry available and selected a small pistol before shutting the door, looking at the camera again, and vanishing, still invisible, into nothing.

“That depends on the kind of artefacts you want to see,” Borgin replied, putting money before morals.

“I need a Muggle handgun enchanted, as well as some physical enhancement trinkets. And I want the best.”

Borgin scrutinised the man, and watched as he withdrew a small pistol and placed it onto the counter. He nodded, picking up the weapon, and then turned to look in the back of the shop, leaving the stranger to peruse the grisly items at the front of the store. Enchantment of Muggle weaponry was a niche market that the store dabbled in when needed; the enchantments put on such devices meant that magical forensics were often unable to trace a killing from them, although very few people sullied themselves with such methods. When they did sell, however, they sold well. He carefully picked up a small paintbrush and a tattered book from a pile in the corner of the shop and quickly thumbed through until he found the relevant page and started to paint invisible runes onto the firearm. Several minutes later, Borgin returned clasping the black pistol in his grubby hands. It looked fairly nondescript and was a weapon of choice for several Muggle security firms.

“A Muggle handgun. Now spelled with accuracy, auto-replenishing ammunition and identity concealment charms. If you speak the trigger word here,” he pointed at a small word he had inscribed on the butt of the pistol, “it will stick to clothing, making it able to be hidden from security or holstered on any surface. It can also be shrunk using the standard shrinking spell.”

The Phoenix cocked his head again, as if examining the item. “Excellent. Now, I need some artefacts which can enhance my strength and agility.”

Borgin frowned slightly. Items such as the ones the customer was requesting were very rare and considered dark, as they could cause the body irreparable damage if used incorrectly. But he, again, was tempted by the lure of the stranger’s coin purse. Who cared if he ruptured his organs using the things? It wasn’t like a wanted man could claim compensation. Borgin went into the back room once more

and carefully selected a gilded box from among the myriad of items in the storage area.

Once he had brought it to the front and opened it, he knew he was in the money. The Phoenix tensed slightly and stood up straighter; the man knew what he wanted when he saw it. There were two rings in the box, two of five Borgin and Burke's possessed. The ones that Borgin had selected were strength and agility rings, forged by goblins and enchanted by Dark wizards.

"The one on the left," he pointed at a silver band with intricate runic inscriptions, "will increase the wearer's strength when the activation words," he pointed at a small scrap of parchment which the ring rested on, "are spoken. Prolonged use, that is a few minutes or more at any one time, can result in severe muscle wastage or atrophy."

The Phoenix raised an eyebrow under his hood, but nodded for Borgin to continue.

"The other," he indicated a golden band this time, with even more minute inscriptions, "will cause the user to speed up, if you will. When activated time will seem to pass more slowly, increasing the user's reaction times. You won't be able to dodge spells, but most things should be fine. You will also fall a lot faster when compared to people moving normally when this ring is worn. Again, speak the keyword to turn it on and off. However, I should warn you that if you use this ring for more than thirty seconds at a time, you will likely cause yourself to have a stroke or ruptured blood vessel. And don't use them together; I don't imagine that your body could take it. These artefacts are considered by certain circles to be dark, so I would be careful about whom you show them."

Borgin named his price for the three items, which caused the Phoenix to sigh slightly and withdraw another money pouch to go with the first. Inside, Borgin was skipping with glee. Burke would have a heart attack when he came back and found the store residing in larger premises than when he left.

"Pleasure doing business with you Mr. Borgin," said the Phoenix. "And I was never here."

“Understood sir. Have a pleasant evening.”

With that, the Phoenix shrunk his purchases, pocketed them, and walked out onto Knockturn Alley before Apparating away, a smile on his face under the mask he wore.

A/N: I know Borgin and Burkes is a cliché, but I think they would sell dodgy artefacts and do bootleg enchantments. At least I didn't give Harry a katana.

Chapter 9 – Reunion

Harry stepped out of the shower and reached blindly for a towel, his vision obscured by thick steam. Finding one, he towelled off his hair and body and stood in front of the mirror to inspect himself thoroughly for the first time since he'd begun exercising. He had, unbelievably, grown an inch since then; he assumed that was a result of the 'core-merging' Dumbledore had talked about. Mrs Weasley wouldn't stop talking about it, much to Harry's chagrin. Ron had been jealous, but Harry knew Ron would be taller than him eventually. He felt in decent shape - good in case of Death Eater attack. His hair was still as messy as ever, and was creeping towards his shoulders. Yet another thing Mrs Weasley wouldn't stop commenting on...

Harry turned away with a satisfied sigh and pulled on his clothes, another jeans/t-shirt combination which he had yet to deviate from in his time at the Burrow. It was now the third week of the summer holidays, and Harry had been living in his new timeline for nearly a month. The previous week had had its ups and downs: Voldemort had won over a small clan of vampires, but the Order emissary had had a narrow escape from Death Eaters when he tried to approach the same vampires. On a more positive note, Harry and Remus were due to visit Sirius today, something which Remus was apparently very eager to do.

Mr and Mrs Weasley had been busy with Order duties, although all the children bar Harry had no idea what they were actually doing (and even then, Harry wasn't supposed to know). The Order hadn't really been doing that much other than surveillance of Death Eaters and searching for the Wand Horcrux. Dumbledore had been giving him daily updates using Fawkes, taking care to deliver only when there was no one in the room. Harry had yet to discover how Fawkes knew when Harry was alone, but he had chalked it up to an ability the magical bird possessed.

Dumbledore had also been debating with him whether to tell the Weasleys of Sirius' innocence, as that was something only the higher up Order members knew at present. Dumbledore had evaded the higher-ups' questions of the Phoenix's identity by claiming that the man had delivered Sirius in the dead of night and taken off before

Dumbledore could verify his identity. McGonagall and Remus had their suspicions, namely that it had been Harry, but they had no proof, whereas Snape seemed to deny that a Potter could break into Azkaban. Finally, to Harry's delight, Dumbledore and Sirius had managed to search Godric's Hollow to recover the Cup Horcrux which the Dark Lord had made Pettigrew hide there years beforehand. Dumbledore had quickly destroyed it afterwards with no ill effects. Four down. Sirius was going to get a big hug from Harry for that.

Today Harry was off to spend some 'quality time' with Remus and, unbeknownst to the Weasleys, Sirius. He trooped down the stairs whistling merrily and feeling positive about his situation, despite Voldemort being back at large. His previous life had gone to hell, and he was happily absorbing everything pleasant about this one. As he entered the kitchen and greeted Mrs Weasley cheerily, he played with one of the disillusioned rings on his right hand. He had decided to keep the rings on his person at all times and bind the gun into the rune stone he had made. It had taken him all week to perform that tricky bit of magic to bind a physical object and he hadn't been helped by his need to do it all in secret. However, he now had an entire costume and set of weapons on hand when he needed it, as long as he was careful to carry the stone around with him wherever he went. Some might call it paranoid, but Harry had made a career out of being prepared. Moody would have been pleased.

"I'm so glad you and Remus get to spend some time together dear," said Mrs Weasley as she set Harry's breakfast in front of him. "He's a good man, and I'm sure you two will have lots to talk about."

"I'm sure we will," Harry replied absentmindedly, picking up the morning's Prophet. It seemed that Dumbledore had finally announced Voldemort's return and Fudge was doing his best to hush it up. Nothing Harry hadn't known already, and Fudge's response wouldn't exactly have been hard to predict. It seemed events in this timeline were running roughly parallel to the events of his fourth year summer.

"Morning," said Ginny, making him look up from the paper. He mumbled a response and shoved a whole slice of toast into his mouth, causing Ginny to wrinkle her nose in disgust. "Where are you going with Mr. Lupin today?" she asked.

"I don't know," Harry lied. He knew full well where they were going: The Shrieking Shack.

"What do you think you're going to do with him?"

"I don't know. Talk, probably," Harry replied, tossing the paper aside in disgust and attacking his toast with renewed vigour. "I expect he has a lot to tell me about my parents."

"By the way, Mum says we're going to go to Diagon Alley next week to pick up some things and was wondering if you wanted to come. Ron never does, but I thought you might," she said with a hopeful look on her face. Harry felt his neck grow hot; he'd never been able to deal with Ginny's crush on him, even if it was less obvious this time round.

"Why next week? What about when we get our school things?"

"She wanted to get some new robes with the money you gave us and says you need some new clothes."

"Sure, I'll come along," Harry agreed, thinking that it was foolish for them to go out unprotected to somewhere like Diagon Alley, despite the risks of Ginny becoming... clingy. Ginny flashed him a wide smile and busied herself with the cereals.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooO

"Harry!" Remus said jovially as Harry emerged from the fireplace into the Headmaster's office. It was now early afternoon, and Harry had spent the morning preparing to meet his old friends again. When he had gone through the Floo he had been uncharacteristically nervous; there was nothing like meeting a dead father-figure that you busted out of prison to make you second-guess yourself. And he hadn't exactly had a while to get to know Remus again before he'd gone to live with the Weasleys in this timeline.

“Hey, Remus,” he replied, nodding at Dumbledore who was standing by the entrance to the office with a smile on his face. “Headmaster, I want to thank you for disposing of that Horcrux.”

“It was my pleasure, Harry, and I think Sirius did much more work than I. And it would also see that Minerva was correct; the magic you are using has adapted your body.”

Harry looked down at himself and nodded. “I’ve grown nearly an inch!”

“I can see that, you’re nearly as tall as I am,” said Remus, moving towards the study door. “Headmaster, I think we’ll go straight there. Is there anything you want me to bring Sirius?”

“I think seeing you is the best thing I would be able to bring him, Remus. And please, call me Albus.”

“Of course, Headmaster,” Remus said cheekily, earning a chuckle from Harry. The pair of them bid Dumbledore goodbye and headed down the stairs and out of the school in companionable silence. As they crossed the grounds heading for the Whomping Willow, Remus struck up some conversation.

“How are you settling in with the Weasleys?”

“As well as can be expected, I think. I mean I hadn’t seen any of them for nearly five years and I’d been flung through some sort of time portal, so I think I’m adjusting alright. The age difference can be a bit frustrating, but I’m coping.”

Remus laughed quietly and stuck his hands in the pockets of his slightly shabby robes. “You remind me of your father. He would have had the same outlook in your situation.”

“Let me guess, ‘but I have my mother’s eyes?’”

“I suppose you’ve been told that one too many times.” They had arrived at the Whomping Willow, which began to flail its limbs at the

perceived threats. Remus lazily levitated a stick to press the knot on its trunk, freezing it.

“Under the trunk there is a – “

“A tunnel to the Shrieking Shack. I know.” Harry interrupted.

“I supposed you had to go down it during your third year on that mad adventure you told us about.” Remus said. “I think I need to hear more about your life, Harry. You’ve already lived it once, and been around versions of Sirius and me. What were we like?”

Harry ducked into the Whomping Willow’s tunnel and thought for a moment. “You were... well, you at least, were like a father figure after Sirius died. It was dark then, people were dying and after Dumbledore was killed it all seemed hopeless. At the Fall of Hogwarts I was so sure I was going to die, you know? I was so underprepared compared to what I could have been. When I was fighting Wormtail... I wasn’t trying to be brave or heroic, I was just trying to survive. I was so scared, Remus. I knocked him over the parapet and then didn’t know what to do then. People were fighting for their lives all around me, some of them fighting to explicitly protect me. But you were there, amidst all the chaos, you were there. With a Portkey to safety... That was the last time I saw the other you, and I never really got to say goodbye to him.”

There was a long silence as they both walked, hunched over slightly, along the earthen tunnel.

“I used to walk down here every month of my time at Hogwarts,” said Remus finally, in a wistful voice. “Your father, Sirius and Peter, they put in so much effort to help me despite what I was. If I had the chance to give a little bit of the kindness they showed me back to you, I’m glad I did, Harry. What I wouldn’t give to see James or Peter laughing or joking again...”

“Even Wormtail?”

“Wormtail and Peter are like two different people in my eyes. Peter was a bit inept sometimes, but he always had something to say and

was excellent at working out escape routes. It would be easy to look back on our years at Hogwarts and say he was bad all along, but that simply isn't true. Wormtail... Wormtail is like his inner darkness, the one in all of us, like the wolf is for me. I'm not sad to say Peter was my friend, but I hate Wormtail with every fibre of my being, for what he did to us and what he did to Peter."

"Looking at it like that... I can see what you mean," Harry replied. He began to straighten up as they reached the end of the tunnel. "Are you ready to see an old friend?"

"I've always been ready."

The pair of them entered the Shrieking Shack to find it startlingly different to when Harry had left Sirius there. The main difference was that the ever-present layer of dust was gone, and a lot of the damage Moony had caused while locked up years ago had been repaired. Harry and Remus went down the stairs, keeping an eye out for Sirius. When they entered the bedroom, which was now complete with a Hogwarts four-poster, Remus was knocked to the floor by an enormous black dog, which enthusiastically licked his face and wagged its tail.

"Merlin, Padfoot! Get off me you mongrel!" Remus laughed, pushing at the bear-sized dog on his chest. Padfoot hopped off of his chest and transformed into Sirius, who was looking far healthier than he had when Harry had rescued him from Azkaban. His hair was now glossy and sleek as opposed to ragged and dishevelled (Harry wondered how he had washed it), he was wearing simple black robes as opposed to Azkaban rags and his face shone with boyish laughter.

"Moony! My god you look old!" Sirius cried, helping his old friend to his feet and embracing him in a hug. "I've been in prison for thirteen years and I've retained my devilishly handsome good looks, what the hell happened to you?"

"Stress, old friend, stress. And I've had to deal with a whole lot of it since your godson arrived from the future and turned everything upside down."

Sirius and Remus broke off their hug and turned to look at Harry, who was leaning on the doorframe and looking at them with raised eyebrows.

"Yes?" he asked innocently.

"He broke me out of Azkaban you know," said Sirius proudly. Harry rolled his eyes at Remus' shocked expression.

"Well done, Sirius, you've managed to tell someone else of my secret identity. Why don't you just owl the Prophet about it?"

"It was you?" Remus said with a look of awe on his face. "You broke into Azkaban fortress? You're the Phoenix?"

"Biggest and best prank ever, I reckon!" Sirius barked, clapping a hand on Remus' shoulder. "Come on, sit down you two. We have a lot to catch up on."

Sirius conjured up some comfortable armchairs and they sat in the space in front of the magnificent four-poster. With another flick of his wand, Sirius summoned a pitcher of water and a bottle of Firewhiskey and set them on the bedside table, which was, like the rest of the room, gleaming with polish and free of any sort of dirt.

"Had the House elves bring it for me," he said with a wink as he uncorked the bottle.

"It's barely two o'clock, Sirius," Remus observed with a smile. "And I assume Dumbledore managed to give you your old wand?" Sirius nodded, fingering the instrument fondly.

"What about me?" Harry said. "Don't try to foist the water onto me. I'm twenty two years old!"

"And you have the body of a twelve-year old, which would pack up at the first hint of alcohol." Sirius shot back.

"Are you saying I'm a lightweight?"

"I'm saying that you should take a moment to think about the consequences if Molly found out." The three men sat for a moment in silence, and shuddered in unison. Voldemort would be a piece of cake compared to that scenario. Sirius doled out a glass of Firewhiskey for him and Remus, and gave a sullen Harry a glass of water.

"So, first things first," said Remus. "Harry, you're the criminal who had the Ministry in uproar? The photo was clearly of a man, not a twelve-year old."

"I'm almost thirteen," Harry mumbled under his breath, before replying. "Watch this. Vestum!"

His pocket glowed white for a second, before Harry began to change. Within seconds the Phoenix sat in the cushy armchair, with a gun in a holster bulging at his hip inside his cloak.

"Beats the Marauder's Map, I reckon," commented Sirius before knocking back the Firewhiskey. Remus just shook his head and drank his drink more slowly. Harry cancelled the transformation and sat there, grinning.

"Not bad, eh? Took me ages to tie that to this stone," he pulled the rock out of his pocket and showed them. "You should be impressed, Remus, since I used some stuff you taught me to make it."

Sirius choked slightly on his recently-refilled glass. "Remus was a teacher? I believe someone owes me a Galleon from a little bet we made in seventh year."

Remus frowned slightly. "Apparently I taught Harry in his third year before Severus let slip I was a werewolf. Didn't Harry tell you that when he broke you out?"

"He gave me a short overview of what happened after his fourth year, and Dumbledore helped fill in most of the gaps, but he never mentioned that particular piece of information. Come on, Moony, pay up."

Remus sighed, trying to keep the moral high ground, and pulled out his money bag. Harry frowned slightly, remembering how hard up Remus was.

“Let me pay that for you, Remus. After all, it never really happened in this timeline.” He pulled out his own coin purse, filled by Mr Weasley when he had been at work, and pulled out a shining Galleon for Sirius. Remus gave him a small nod of appreciation.

“Moving on,” said Sirius, “What about your Marauder nickname, Harry? We did give you one, right?”

“Not really, seeing as the time for fun and games was largely over by the time we got to really get to know each other. Making up nicknames kind of pales in comparison to Voldemort killing indiscriminately.”

“Fair enough, but we have time now. Do you have an Animagus form yet?”

“I’ve been told I can become one,” mused Harry as he took a sip of water, “but I never really got round to it. I mean it’s a lot of work isn’t it? You have to meditate to find your form and then there are the wandless transfiguring exercises... I just didn’t have the time.”

“You don’t have a form? We’ll have to remedy that as soon as possible... Remus, you reckon Minnie would teach him?” Sirius asked.

“I have no doubt Professor McGonagall would teach Harry if you didn’t call her ‘Minnie’ when asking her.” Remus replied with a smile.

“We’ll need a name in the meantime. Cub? Pronglet?”

Harry screwed up his face in disgust. “Pronglet? Real original there, Sirius. What would your son be, Padlet?”

“It was just a suggestion!”

"There's not much point in having a name if I'll have to change it when I find my form. We'll have to come back to this line of thought later," Harry shrugged.

"Getting back on topic," said Remus, "So you're telling me that you broke into Azkaban and freed Sirius? And Dumbledore let you?"

"Let isn't the word I'd use..." Harry began hesitantly as Sirius laughed at the guilty expression on his face. "Well, actually I completely disobeyed a direct order he had given me. What can I say; I didn't like the thought of my godfather rotting in prison."

"I'll drink to that," said Sirius, downing yet another glass of Firewhiskey. He blinked as he swallowed, but seemed to be displaying a surprising resistance to its effects.

"Highly dangerous and illegal acts aside," Remus said, "what's your plan now? Voldemort is back, according to Dumbledore's 'source', and I assume you know that already."

"Actually I'm the source; I had a Legilimetic response to the magic surrounding Voldemort's rebirth – we're connected through the scar he gave me."

"So you definitely know he's back then. What do you think the Order should be doing?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Well, there are guards in significant areas now, which is important, we're trying to raise awareness despite that fool Fudge stopping us, and we know what to look for with regards to Death Eater activity. I've also supplied all the names I know of Voldemort's inner circle, and we have a plan in place in case Azkaban is attacked. Dumbledore tells me Voldemort is recruiting again; the thugs and the lowlifes, all of them desperate to earn a bit of his respect and any rewards he will bestow upon them. Of course they're incredibly stupid for believing that, but who am I to stop them? At the rate he's going Voldemort will end up with an army of morons."

"Strength in numbers though. The Order has a depressingly small amount of proficient duellers, even though we're bigger than last

time,” said Sirius morosely. “There’s Kingsley, Tonks and the rest of the Aurors and Aurors-in-training, but a lot of the rest couldn’t stand up to a Death Eater.”

“You have me, and I reckon that evens the odds somewhat,” Harry said flatly, without a trace of arrogance. “I’m more powerful than I was in the future; my body is already changing to accommodate that power. We also have the crucial element of surprise. Voldemort doesn’t know we know that he’s back. If the Order stays inconspicuous regarding its guarding of key locations, we should be fine until he attacks. I’ve asked Dumbledore to tell me as soon as he knows of an attack in progress, so I, or rather the Phoenix, can lend a hand.”

“You sound like you know what you’re doing,” Remus noted.

“It was pretty much my life when we were on the run. I was the one who mentally checked what Voldemort was up to and provided the muscle when push came to shove. Ron... Ron was the tactician, and handy in a fight as well. Hermione was our knowledge base; she worked out where we were supposed to be looking.”

There was a brief silence as Harry thought about what he had lost in the future he had experienced.

“So, Remus,” said Sirius loudly, breaking the moment of reflection, “You should tell me about what you’ve been doing while I was in prison. Meet any birds?”

Ooo
oooooooooooooO

“Mrs Weasley, how are you this morning?” wheezed Tom, the barman of the Leaky Cauldron, as Harry stumbled through the Floo with his typical lack of grace. The bar was just as he had remembered it; dingy and grubby with a slew of interesting customers. Ginny emerged behind him with considerably less stumbling and gave him a quick smile as they walked through the pub towards Diagon Alley.

A week had passed since he had met with Sirius and Remus and Harry had set off with Mrs Weasley and Ginny to pick up some new clothes, and (more importantly) the new brooms he had promised to treat his friends with. Ron had been enthusiastic about the brooms but was told he had to stay and do his homework, which he had neglected to make a start on. Harry had also found out Hermione was coming to stay at the Burrow a week after his birthday. This was, he remembered with a grin, the day he had blown up Aunt Marge in the previous timeline.

"I'm so glad you decided to come, Harry dear," said Mrs Weasley. "We really do need to get you some new clothes; the ones your disgraceful relatives gave you are just appalling!"

"Sure thing, Mrs Weasley, I'm glad you're here to help," Harry chuckled, causing Mrs Weasley to go pink with pleasure and open up the alley portal. Harry just sniggered, causing Ginny to look at him and then blush when they made eye contact. Harry rolled his eyes when she looked away. Crushing girls irritated him, even now.

Their first port of call was Gringotts, in which the Goblins confirmed Harry's vault now had shared ownership with the Weasley one. When Mrs Weasley had read precisely how much was in Harry's vault she had had to sit down for a while, but ultimately they managed to withdraw a tidy sum of money with minimal fuss and move on into Madam Malkin's Muggle Clothing section, where Harry was subjected to nearly two hours of what could only be described as torture. By the time they had chosen him everything from jeans to smart-casual underwear, it was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon and they hadn't visited any of the other shops they needed to. Mrs Weasley had also picked out a few robes for herself, Ginny and Mr Weasley, to replace their aging pairs. The cashier had been happy to shrink the multitude of packages they had accrued and they walked out into the afternoon sun with significantly lighter moneybags.

As the threesome moved down the Alley towards Quality Quidditch Supplies, dodging the bustling crowds, Harry caught sight of Tonks loitering in the shade of an apothecary, her hair a mundane brown. She noticed them and gave Mrs Weasley a sharp nod; Harry realised she was probably on guard duty. Harry kept his head down; so far he

hadn't been recognised, and he had been enjoying his shopping trip. All it took was for one person to say "It's Harry Potter!" and people would be all over him. Voldemort supporters included.

"Good afternoon, and welcome to Quality Quidditch Supplies," said the shopkeeper, a friendly-looking plump gentleman with a gravity-defying handlebar moustache. "Looking for anything in particular?"

Mrs Weasley negotiated the purchase of four medium-range brooms while Ginny and Harry wandered around the store, testing Quaffles and examining Broom-Servicing Kits, Harry keeping an eye out for trouble all the while. Mrs Weasley was precise with what she wanted - a set of Cleansweep Sevens - so the transaction was finalised fairly quickly. The brooms were arranged to be delivered directly to the Burrow, and the three of them left the shop chatting happily and discussing where to go next, settling on Florean Fortescue's for a delicious snack.

Harry moved aside to let an elderly wizard past and looked into the multitude of people, hastily flattening down his hair lest he be recognised, to see if there were any more Order guards dotted around. He quickly spotted Tonks again, who had changed her hair to dirty blonde in the time they were in the store, and also caught sight of dark-haired Hestia Jones, who was pretending to peruse the window of Flourish and Blotts up ahead of them.

He also noticed a group of wizards in black robes walk from an alleyway between Magical Menagerie and Flourish and Blotts. There were five of them, and they looked unkempt and grubby, and carried themselves with an arrogant air. Harry would have said they were common thugs, but they seemed to be more insidious than that. He stopped dead in his tracks, ignoring the cursing of a witch who had walked right into him, and stared at the group. He saw one of them reach into the pockets of his robes, nod to the others, and pull out a distinctive white mask along with his wand.

"GET DOWN!" Harry barked, grabbing Ginny and Mrs Weasley by the back of their robes and pushing them to the ground with a surprising show of strength. His outburst turned a lot of heads, and the Death Eaters, now complete with faceless masks, noticed. Harry saw Tonks

and Hestia draw their wands, just as the Death Eaters raised their wands at the nearest target, a group of giggling young witches, aged around ten or eleven.

“Confringo!” one of the Death Eaters spat, the spell impacting on the cobbles behind the girls and causing a deafening explosion. The girls were sent sprawling, shards of stone slicing into the backs of their arms and necks. The Alley froze for a split second, and then all hell broke loose.

People began to scream and shove each other out of the way in a bid to get away from the Death Eaters. Mrs Weasley got up and grabbed Ginny by the arm, hauling her to one side, and then turning back for Harry, who had been lost in the throng of panicking witches and wizards. He took advantage of this fact, running into the nearest deserted alleyway as the Order guards and the Death Eaters began to duel furiously in the middle of the road.

“Vestum!” Harry whispered, feeling the transformation into his alter ego wash over him. A long cloak fell around his ankles, thick boots clad his feet and gloves appeared on his hands, along with the rest of his costume. The Death Eaters wouldn’t know what hit them. He strode out of the alleyway, to the shock of people fleeing nearby, and onto the Alley itself. Most of the frightened shoppers had moved down the road to Gringotts and into other stores, leaving the battle zone clear and the alley essentially deserted. He looked down to see one of the girls from the first blast lying on her side, clutching her leg and wincing, no one having stopped to help her. She was the only person still nearby, besides the combatants.

The Phoenix quickly crossed the Alley and picked her up gently. He could hear the sounds of battle raging behind him, and hoped Tonks and Hestia could keep fighting until he could join in.

“You’re... you’re the Phoenix!” said the girl in a high-pitched tone, her blue eyes bulging in fright.

“Got it in one. Now when I put you down, stay out of sight and try not to watch the fighting. It could get messy,” Harry replied from behind his bandana. He quickly jogged back to where he had transformed

and deposited the girl there, checking to see if there was any serious injury other than the small cuts she had. Her leg was swelling painfully, but nothing was broken. Satisfied, Harry turned to the battle and broke into a run.

Tonks was holding her own against three of the masked thugs; she looked like she was playing a game of high-speed tennis as her wand whipped from left to right, sending spells back to their casters in bursts of coloured light and blocking the rest. She was on the defensive, unable to cast any spells at her laughing opponents while being forced to dodge and parry all of theirs. Hestia was faring very badly; she had a cut cheek and leg, and was barely holding up against the other two. As Harry sprinted past Flourish and Blotts (and took note of the faces of the people inside pressed against the glass, not willing to help but content to watch), he saw a ugly purple curse drop beneath her guard and strike her in the stomach, sending her sprawling. The Order member cracked her head on the Alley pavement and was driven into unconsciousness

“Hestia!” Tonks cried, not able to reach her fallen comrade. The Death Eaters who had been duelling Hestia chuckled callously and turned to fight Tonks, woefully ignorant of the costumed man running towards them.

“Hey!” Harry shouted, whispering the activation word for his speed-enhancing ring under his breath. He gasped in shock as the entire world appeared to slow down, spells becoming visible streaks of light as they bounced from person to person and the incantations becoming slow and deep. He hadn’t tried the rings before, but Harry quickly collected himself as the two Death Eaters turned sluggishly to face him. He jumped and lashed out with his booted foot, deactivating the ring as he did so. The Death Eater just had time to blink in surprise before Harry’s foot connected with his jaw, making a hideous crunching noise and sending him flying backwards.

“What the fuck?” said his companion, turning his wand onto Harry. The Phoenix whipped out his gun, knocking his opponent’s wand aside with his other hand in a practised movement and bringing his weapon to bear. He fired three times, feeling the thrill of battle fill his body with a rush of adrenaline. The Death Eater’s eyes widened

behind his bone-white mask as the bullets thudded into his abdomen, and he fell down with a gasp and clutched at his stomach in agony. Harry then turned to the three-on-one duel next to him, which had begun to slow down upon his arrival. Tonks was sweating profusely, and the other Death Eaters were just beginning to understand what had happened to their fellows. Harry holstered his pistol with a deft movement and drew his wand, levelling it at the nearest Death Eater's head.

"You picked the wrong day to attack, buddy. Plecto!" he moved his wrist in a whip-like movement, the spell striking the Death Eater in the back and causing a crack to reverberate around the deserted alley. The Death Eater screamed in agony and dropped his wand, while Harry finished him off with a crimson stunner to the head. One of the remaining Death Eaters duelling Tonks turned to face Harry with a snarl, leaving her to deal with the leader of the group.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" the Death Eater growled, raising his wand.

"Your worst nightmare. Now, are you going to duel me or just stand there like a fucking pansy?" the Phoenix shot back. The Death Eater's face twisted into a grimace of hate and he shot off a green curse at Harry, who deftly dodged it.

"Extorqueos!" he snapped, pointing his wand at the Death Eater's left leg. The Death Eater threw up a shield however, and the spell burst onto it in a shower of fiery sparks and loud bang. Harry ducked the next curse sent at him, and fired another Extorqueos at his opponent. This time the spell hit the Death Eater's wrist on his non-wand hand, wrenching it back to an unnatural angle and causing a shard of bone to pierce the skin in a spray of blood and flesh. The Death Eater roared in pain, doubled over and clutched at his injured limb, leaving Harry open to kick him soundly in the face and send him sprawling onto the blood-stained cobblestones.

The last Death Eater fell to the ground as Tonks finished off her opponent, sending him to the ground with a stunner.

“Who the bloody hell are you?” she said breathlessly, training her wand on Harry and wiping her brow.

“I’m the Phoenix, and those were Death Eaters,” Harry said from behind his disguise. He heard a wracking cough behind him, and whirled around to curse whatever made it. The Death Eater he had incapacitated first had recovered and was in the process of activating his Portkey. Harry shot off a stunner but missed as the Death Eater vanished along with his companions, leaving only broken stones and blood-stains behind. Harry swore viciously and disappeared before Tonks could try to detain him.

With a muffled crack, Harry appeared in the alleyway where the Death Eaters had emerged from and swiftly removed his Phoenix costume. The Alley then resounded with the popping sound that accompanied Apparition as the Auror forces arrived on the scene, a squad of five spread out over the Alley with their wands drawn. Harry stayed out of sight as he saw Tonks gesticulating wildly at the lead Auror, who he recognised as Dawlish. Hestia Jones was checked over by one of them and Portkeyed away, presumably to St Mungo’s. Dawlish signalled to the members of his team and most of them disappeared away along with Tonks, leaving two of their number behind; a young man who looked brand new to the forces to repair the stonework and clean away the blood and a woman to go check over the young girl in the alleyway where Harry had left her.

“The situation has been resolved!” he called, magically amplifying his voice. “You may continue with your shopping! Anybody who is nursing injuries, please report to St. Mungo's for healing.”

With that, he went to help his companion Portkey the injured girl away, leaving the Alley in silence. Soon people began to trickle out of the shops where they had been hiding, and conversation struck back up again, terse and stilted. Harry stood with his back to the brick wall behind him, breathing heavily. He felt giddy from the battle, intoxicated with the power he had wielded. He hadn’t been in a fight since he had had the time-turner accident, and he felt good now that he had. His spells had had more of a kick behind them than before, he could feel the force he had been able to command, like a buzz at the base of his skull.

He felt his heart rate returning to normal and his laboured breathing slowed. Harry checked himself over to see if he was presentable, and then left the alleyway to look for Mrs Weasley and Ginny. Keeping his scar carefully concealed to avoid attracting unwanted attention; he quickly picked out the two redheads in the crowd and made a beeline for them. Mrs Weasley looked immensely relieved when she saw him, and quickly enveloped him in a hug.

“Harry! There you are! My goodness I was worried. Those men... they were-“

“Death Eaters. I know. Maybe the Prophet will listen now?” Harry said, untangling himself from Mrs Weasley and checking to see they weren’t being overheard. “I reckon we should leave, unless you need to get anything else?”

“No dear, no. Let’s head home.”

They set off down the Alley in terse silence, mirroring the rest of the shaken populace. Out of the corner of his eye Harry spotted Rita Skeeter walking out of a shop and quickened his pace. No doubt the Daily Prophet would have a sensationalist story the next day.

Chapter 10 – Many Happy Returns

Diagon Alley Attacked!

Sirius Black and the Phoenix involved!

By Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent

Diagon Alley was attacked by a group of masked men yesterday afternoon, led by none other than Sirius Black, escaped mass murderer. Eye-witness reports are confused at present, but it is common consensus that his accomplice the Phoenix – in a different outfit than last time - was also present, fuelling fears that the pair are going to take up the mantle of Dark Lords. A group of innocent children and one adult were injured in the attacks, but fortunately Aurors arrived at the scene in time to stop any further injuries.

“I was terrified, it was like we had been taken back ten years to You-Know-Who’s reign of terror!” said one shopper. What worried this reporter most is not Sirius Black, but the robed figure of the Phoenix, as he is popularly known. Who is he? Did he work for You-Know-Who? Where has he come from? So far, no one knows.

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, has made outrageous claims that the attack was by Death Eaters, causing public backlash and scorn. Esteemed Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge has this to say on the matter:

“If it was ‘Death Eaters’, like Dumbledore so foolishly says, then where was the Dark Mark, the symbol of their atrocities? This was a random attack by a splinter faction lead by a notorious murderer and the man that broke him out of Azkaban. The Ministry have several leads as to their numbers and identities and Minister Fudge is confident that Aurors will catch them within days.”

Harry felt a tinge of anger as he read Umbridge’s blatant lies. She was back in the frame, it seemed. And if things continued as Harry expected them to, his Defence Against the Dark Arts education would be taking a nosedive in the coming Hogwarts year. He took out what

anger he felt on his cereals, mashing them viciously with his spoon while Fred studied the discarded paper next to him.

“So you really didn’t see anything?” he asked, chewing absently on his breakfast.

“No, Fred, for the hundredth time, I saw nothing. Ask Ginny about it, I was stuck in some shop for the entire thing.” Harry replied, exasperated. When he, Ginny and Mrs Weasley had arrived back from Diagon Alley they had been peppered with questions from all members of the family about what had happened. Ron was distinctly put out that he hadn’t been able to come along. However, he was put in his place by Mrs Weasley, who said that none of her children should ever be excited by the Death Eater’s atrocities. Harry was indifferent about the whole thing; the Death Eaters were incredibly foolish for conducting such an attack so early and no one had been hurt.

Dumbledore had sent him a letter via the usual methods, which contained valuable insight which had not been disclosed to the Order. Snape had reported that the Death Eaters were new recruits who had acted instinctively, wanting to get a taste of the power they thought they wielded behind the masks. Voldemort’s anger had, apparently, been a sight to behold after they nearly revealed his ‘secret’ return. Voldemort was also, according to Snape, distinctly interested in the Phoenix’s identity, seeing as the masked man had killed one of his men and incapacitated three others with not one injury to show for it. Dumbledore had been displeased at Harry’s use of force, but reasoned that there was a distinct risk of bystanders being injured if he hadn’t intervened. Hestia Jones had been released from St Mungo’s almost immediately, having been hit with a stomach-acid hex which had caused her abdomen to become inflamed and irritated, but was easily curable along with her head injury.

Harry knew that he would savour the moment when his identity was revealed, if only for the look on Voldemort’s face when he realised who the Phoenix actually was. He polished off the rest of his cereals and headed off upstairs to write a letter back to Dumbledore while Ron was in the shower, passing a sleepy looking Ginny on the way out.

As soon as she was sure Harry was out of earshot, Ginny perked up and rushed to the table to talk to Fred.

“Yeah George and I are asking around,” Fred replied through a mouthful of breakfast. Ginny wrinkled her nose in disgust and piled food onto her plate. As far as the Weasleys knew Harry’s birthday would be the first party he had ever had, and Mrs Weasley wanted it to be extra special. So Ginny had commissioned the twins to work on a special surprise for Harry. The birthday was to be one to remember.

Lord Voldemort eyed the crown of the shaking Death Eater's head with abject disgust. The man had led an attack, against his express orders, on Diagon Alley. And what was worse, he had been defeated. Voldemort sat in his chair in the living room of the Riddle Mansion with the man kneeling in front of him and gripped his wand slightly tighter.

"I... I couldn't see his face; he had a hood on my Lord. He was dressed all in red, I'm sure it was that person from the newspapers recently my Lord, maybe you-"

“Of course I saw the newspapers you fool.” Voldemort snapped, lashing out with his wand to deliver a ringing blow to the man’s back. He cried out and fell to one knee, and Voldemort smirked. He looked up into the fire in the grandiose, marble, fireplace ahead of him and thought. The living room he was in was sumptuous, a lesson in extravagance, all plush rugs and antique furniture in deep wines and purples. It did nothing for Voldemort. Tired of the Death Eater, who evidently knew no more useful information, Voldemort raised his hand.

“Get out of my sight, Epsom.” He snapped, and the man froze, sweating in fear, before slowly getting to his feet and backing out of the room. Before he could reach the large wooden door, Voldemort shot a violet bone-breaking spell at the back of his leg, feeling a spike of satisfaction when the Death Eater screeched in pain and crumpled, before dragging himself out of the room.

He despised the weakness in his ranks. Voldemort was to make the world kneel, to make the ones of unclean heritage whisper his name in reverence through bloodied lips. He would crush the opposition before him like a storm, and he could not do that with substandard, rebellious, Death Eaters. He quietly made a note on the parchment next to him to have the four fools who had gone on the mission sent on a mission where they were likely to die the next time. Examples had to be made.

He leaned back in his chair with a barely audible sigh, contemplating the conundrum of the Phoenix. The man had appeared out of nowhere and had broken into Azkaban, of all places. The Dark Lord brushed his hair out of his eyes and closed them, thinking hard.

The Phoenix was evidently a dangerous enemy. But, for now, he seemed to not want to attack Voldemort directly. In the meantime, the morale of the opposition needed to be broken, and his place needed to be re-established. This time there would be no compromise. He picked up the parchment and quill and began to slowly and deliberately sketch a schematic of the Hogwarts Express, thinking carefully as he did so...

Ooo
oooooooooooooooooooooO

Harry awoke two uneventful weeks later with a throbbing pain in his scar, and a vague feeling of satisfaction that he couldn't place. He was edgy at first, and made a note to tell Dumbledore about the incident, in case any Order spies had picked up information that would make Voldemort happy. The scar itself hadn't really bothered him all that much since he had changed timelines, except when he had been overly tired, like in Dumbledore's office. Rubbing it absently,

he skirted Ron's bed and pulled on his running clothes to go for his morning jog.

He entered the kitchen and was immediately uneasy. There was something not quite right about the seemingly deserted room, something which set him on edge. He pulled out his wand from his tracksuit pocket and examined the bare table with the practiced eye of someone used to ambushes.

"SURPRISE!" yelled a voice from behind him and he felt someone envelop him in a bear hug. Moving purely on instinct, Harry stamped on the toe of his attacker, grabbed one of the arms which was on his shoulder, and span around to pin it behind the attacker's back with Harry's wand pressed into his assailant's temple. The movement took less than a second to execute and caused a deathly hush to descend upon the kitchen.

In front of him were Mrs Weasley, one of the twins, Percy, Ron and Ginny, all with their mouths open and looking shocked. Harry glanced at the person he was holding hostage and noticed that it was the other Weasley twin. He immediately relaxed the hold and put his wand away, feeling incredibly embarrassed.

"Jesus, Harry, jumpy much?" said the twin, who was revealed to be George. "My toe'll hurt for a week!"

"Sorry, George, I'm a bit on edge so early in the morning," Harry muttered hastily, not meeting anyone's eyes. He hoped his sleep-mussed hair would lend credibility to his lie.

"Honestly, George, what were you thinking jumping on him like that when you know dangerous people are on the loose? No wonder the poor dear is edgy!" Mrs Weasley scolded, breaking the tension. Percy pushed his glasses back up his nose and went back into the living room where the Weasleys had been hiding while the rest of the family started to wish Harry a happy birthday. Harry could have slapped himself; it was his birthday and he had forgotten!

Then again, there wasn't much cause for celebration when it came to the Boy-Who-Lived's birthday in the past. Usually it was marked by

some atrocity committed by Voldemort to remind Harry who ruled the Wizarding World. Harry let himself be bundled into the Weasley's living room and thrust onto a sagging sofa, next to a pile of presents, which were wrapped in various garish colours.

George tossed him a present at random from the pile; Harry recognised Hermione's fussy wrapping and tore it open with a flourish. Inside was a Broomstick Servicing Kit; evidently some things hadn't changed. Also included was his 'first' birthday card, written in Hermione's fussy script. Ron had given him a selection of sweets, which had probably been Owl-Ordered from Honeydukes.

The next present he was given was from Hagrid. Harry grasped it gingerly, remembering the Monster Book of Monsters he had received the last time he had had his thirteenth birthday. Sure enough the present was the book he had expected and Harry covertly stroked it before things got out of hand. The Weasleys quizzed him on what he thought the book meant, but no one could come up with a good explanation, and Harry wasn't forthcoming on his theories.

From the Dursleys he just received an empty box. Why they bothered posting things like that, and how they got to his location, Harry couldn't understand. Fred and George had got him some assorted practical jokes, much to Mrs Weasley's chagrin. From Ginny he had got a nondescript silver chain, which he immediately took a liking to, to her delight. His last present was from Remus, who had selected a hefty and interesting-looking book about Auror skills and useful spells for duelling. Finally all the presents were gone, along with their accompanying cards, which just left the remaining cards without presents attached.

The first one, a lurid purple creation speckled with golden stars, was from Dumbledore, wishing him a happy birthday and saying that the treasure hunt he was on was going well, which Harry correctly deciphered as code about the Horcrux hunt. Sirius had sent him a scruffy piece of parchment with a paw-print on, which Harry appreciated despite no else understanding the significance.

Once he was done with his present opening, and surrounded by a small circle of torn wrapping paper, Mrs Weasley appeared from the

kitchen floating a large fruit cake shaped like a pair of glasses in front of her. She set it down on a small table beside the sofa while the rest of the Weasleys (including Percy, who looked uncomfortable) sung Happy Birthday and clapped as he blew out the candles.

“Arthur wishes he could be here, but he has to work today. What the Ministry is doing, hauling him in on a Saturday, is beyond me...” Mrs Weasley muttered, ushering everyone back into the kitchen to have some of the cake for breakfast. “Honestly, the Minister is denying You-Know-Who is back, so why does my husband have to work overtime?”

“Fudge’ll come round in the end, Mum, it’s not Dad’s fault he’s such a prat,” said George, doling round plates to the assembled guests.

“Minister Fudge is doing the best he can,” snapped Percy angrily from where he was sitting opposite Ginny, his ears flushing red. Harry snapped his gaze towards the bespectacled Weasley.

“Minister Fudge is a fool, Percy, you should have realised that by now, surely.”

“If Minister Fudge says that You-Know-Who is not back, he is not back! He would know!” Percy replied, pushing his glasses up his nose again and glancing at his mother for support. Mrs Weasley’s mouth had gone very thin, reminiscent of McGonagall.

“Dumbledore says that You-Know-Who is back, Percy. He is back, and we must do all we can to fight him,” said Mrs Weasley.

“The newspapers are saying Dumbledore has lost his marbles! There’s talk of him losing his official positions if he carries on spouting sensationalist rubbish!”

“Your father trusts Dumbledore.”

“Yes, but Father is hardly the most ambitious man, is he?” Percy shot back, causing a deathly hush to fall across the kitchen. The rest of the family was flicking their heads back and forth as the argument

unfolded, as if at a tennis match. The delicious fruit cake sat on the table, totally forgotten.

"I'm sorry, Percy, what are you implying?" said Mrs Weasley, her voice deadly calm.

"I'm saying that Father is dragging this family down!" Percy went on, oblivious to the hole he was digging for himself. "By siding with the likes of Dumbledore, he's risking the family reputation! We would be in the poorhouse if it wasn't for his," he gestured at Harry, "money!"

Mrs Weasley swelled like a bullfrog, her eyes glinting dangerously. Harry grinned behind his hand while the other Weasleys were giving Percy looks of hatred. "Your father," she began, "is an honest, decent, hard-working individual. And I believe Harry has a name. Don't you dare try to criticise your father."

"Someone needs to say it!" Percy got to his feet, his glasses wobbling dangerously. "I refuse to stand here and let our family fall into ruin!"

"Children," Mrs Weasley looked at the twins, Ginny and Harry, "Could you please go upstairs while I talk to Percy?"

"I don't know mum, maybe we should stay?" said George, shooting Percy a vicious scowl. Ginny and Ron had gotten up to obey their mother, but still looked distinctly angry with their elder brother.

"Now. I need to talk to your brother in private," Mrs Weasley snapped, in a tone that brooked no argument. The look on her face suggested she would be doing most of the talking, and Percy would swear Fudge was a madman by the end of it. Harry got up with the twins and they filed out of the room silently, throwing Percy one last look before they left. As soon as they were out of the room they bolted for the stairs and rushed into Bill's old room, which was above the kitchen, and collectively pressed their ears to the floorboards.

As it turned out, they didn't need to be stealthy at all. Mrs Weasley's roars, along with Percy's furious shouts, could be heard through the house. From what Harry could hear Percy thought very little of his father, Dumbledore and Harry, and took offence at Harry being

allowed houseroom and treated like a younger brother while Percy was constantly belittled by the rest of the family.

When he had said that, the kitchen suddenly went very quiet, as had Bill's bedroom. The twins looked horrified that their teasing had had such an effect, but they still didn't like what Percy was saying about their father. Harry flattened his ear to the floor and strained to listen to the rest of the conversation, but it was conducted in very hushed tones. Finally they heard Mrs Weasley sobbing, and the thumping sound of someone coming up the stairs. Percy's bedroom door opened, slammed, and then opened again a short time later. They heard someone descend the stairs once more, Mrs Weasley wail again, and then the front door slammed shut with a sickening finality.

The teenagers all bustled to peer out of the window, to see Percy stride from the house with his Hogwarts trunk trailing behind him and a look on his face Harry found hard to describe. He reached the gate, hailed the Knight Bus, and departed with a crack on the purple automobile.

"He just... left?" said Ron weakly and left to go comfort his mother. Ginny looked very pale, and followed him without a word. Fred, George and Harry just sat on Bill's bed. The twins looked like they didn't know what to say.

"It wasn't your faults, you know," Harry said quietly. "He's loyal to the Ministry, for now. Although I can't say we were very pleasant to Percy..."

"Too right," said Fred. "I can't stop thinking of all the pranks we pulled on him this summer... I thought he would have said something if he felt like that. I mean, no offence Harry, but he's our brother and all and we wouldn't want him feeling displaced by you."

Harry and George nodded solemnly. Harry looked around the room and saw that he was alone with the twins, and he had an idea, despite the time not exactly being perfect.

"Fred, George," he said, "What can you tell me about Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs?"

The twins turned to look at him sharply, their eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Never heard of them," George answered immediately. Too quickly.

"Don't play dumb with me, George. Any chance they left a Map lying around?"

"How do you know about the Map?" they chorused, and Harry suppressed a smile. He quickly shut the door of the room and sank into Bill's desk chair.

"Remus told me about it, and wondered where it had got to. I've seen you with a mysterious piece of parchment, and put two and two together. I'm not a moron."

"Never said you where, Harry," said Fred, "But how does Mr. Lupin know about it?"

"He's Moony." Harry said simply.

The looks on their faces was priceless, easily the best present Harry had had all day. "And I know who the other three are."

"Who?" the twins replied, leaning forward on the bed.

"Well Wormtail was Peter Pettigrew, Padfoot was Sirius Black, and Prongs was my dad James. They were all friends at Hogwarts and made the map in their sixth year."

"Your dad was friends with Sirius Black?" George asked incredulously. "But he's a psycho!"

"He must've been alright at school I suppose," Harry shrugged. "I don't know what the nicknames mean, but I know the Map exists."

"Hmm... well, Harry, I reckon it would be a fitting birthday present to give the Map to you, seeing as you're a Marauder's son and all... but could you give us until the end of the holidays to copy the layout on

it? The people thing is dead useful, but a layout of Hogwarts would be just as handy to have.”

“Sure. Thanks guys, I appreciate it. Now I reckon we need to go comfort your mum and find out what happened to Percy.” The twins stood up instantly, having forgotten about the family rift in the excitement of learning their heroes’ identities. With that the three of them traipsed downstairs to lend words of support and curse Percy’s name to the rafters, like the good sons they were. Ron, in particular, didn’t want to let his mother’s cake baking skills go to waste.

[illegible]

“Bill! Charlie!” cried Ginny, giving her older brothers a quick hug each as they appeared through the Floo. The older Weasley sons had decided to stay for the last few weeks of the holidays since Percy had left and Harry had arrived – after all, in this time, they had never actually met Harry.

It had been two weeks since Harry's birthday and Percy's estrangement; Harry had been in the new timeline for roughly sixty days. Mr Weasley had heard he was staying in a Ministry-sponsored hostel outside of Hogsmeade. He had refused to have any sort of contact with his parents and had threatened to call the DMLE when Mr Weasley had gone to visit. It seemed to Harry like events regarding Percy were unfolding identically to before. Mr and Mrs Weasley had been very cut up about their son's comments, especially regarding Mr Weasley, but had managed to cope admirably. The thing that had hurt her most was a short note Percy had sent informing her he wouldn't be taking the Express that year, and had been made Head Boy.

All of the children thought very little of Percy, and it seemed Bill and Charlie shared their opinions. Harry still felt pangs of guilt over the incident – he had, after all, been partially responsible. He knew something like this could happen, yet he had done nothing. Still, he reasoned that it was Percy's choice, and he would probably come round in the end.

Meanwhile, Harry felt like he was going slightly insane in the absence of people his own age to talk to.

Voldemort was still frustratingly quiet. Snape had consistently reported that something was being planned, but most of the Death Eaters were in the dark over it. Snape seemed to think it involved Azkaban, and could only place the date at around the end of August. As a precaution the Order had increased their unofficial guard on public places, and stationed a watch near Azkaban in a rented Muggle yacht. The Death Eater meetings were fairly infrequent and, again according to Snape, fairly boring. Recruiting was sporadic at the moment, but Voldemort had yet to reveal himself, so that couldn't be taken as a good sign.

Fudge was still causing political havoc, having had Dumbledore stripped of a lot of his titles, including Supreme Mugwump and head of the Wizengamot. Harry had seriously offered via Fawkes to kill Fudge, reasoning that it would make things easier in the long run. Dumbledore had been very apprehensive about such a scheme, as it meant that Umbridge might become Minister, which Harry had assured him was definitely not good. Dumbledore had accepted, however, the fact that Fudge might have to be removed eventually, if he kept causing trouble for the Order. Harry, frankly, just needed the word and the Phoenix would be at Fudge's doorstep in minutes.

"Bill! You really need to do something about that haircut," admonished Mrs Weasley. "It's getting far too long, you'll have it in a ponytail next!" she said, fiddling with Bill's shoulder-length red hair. Harry smiled to himself, knowing that Mrs Weasley was exactly right. Charlie was just as Harry remembered – stocky, burned, and sporting bulging muscles. Harry himself wasn't looking too bad from all his running, but that kind of exercise did little for his muscle size.

"And this must be Harry," said Bill, having greeted the rest of his family. "The Harry Potter eh? I've heard good things about you from Ron and Ginny. Thanks for saving her from that god-forsaken chamber by the way; I heard you had to fight a Basilisk!"

"Now Bill, I'm sure Harry doesn't want to talk about that," Mr Weasley said good naturedly, patting his son on the shoulder. Bill nodded and

winked to Harry; Charlie had given Harry an approving look at the mention of the Basilisk. It seemed that the eldest Weasley children had accepted him without question.

Bill and Charlie were also there to help with Diagon Alley shopping – the book lists had arrived that very morning and, although Harry had not had a chance to browse his list yet, he knew that the children wouldn't be allowed to go to Diagon Alley. Bill was a member of the Order of the Phoenix, according to Dumbledore, so Mrs Weasley, Mr Weasley, Bill and Charlie would be going together. Mrs Weasley didn't want to risk her children and not all of the things on the list could be Owl Ordered. Harry didn't mind.

Hermione had been owling them more and more often following the skirmish in Diagon Alley. She herself wasn't going – she was Owl Ordering everything she could and had politely asked Mrs Weasley if should pick up the excess, which Mrs Weasley had readily agreed to do. They would see her on September the first. From what he could tell she was intensely interested in the identity of the Phoenix. Harry knew she hated a mystery, but hoped she wouldn't figure out his secret too quickly.

"So, Harry, how have your holidays been?" said Charlie, as the family wandered into the living room to chat amiably.

"Not bad, mainly playing Quidditch. I'm a seeker, like you were."

"I've heard that you're damn good, Harry. I wouldn't mind seeing you play!"

"I doubt I'm a scratch on you. You were the best Gryffindor's had in years!"

"Hey, if you can defeat a Basilisk at twelve years old, I think you'll be better at Quidditch than I am. Here, Bill and I got you a present when we heard about what happened in the Chamber. It's from Romania, where I work." Charlie pulled out a fang which was just over an inch long and made of gleaming white ivory. Carved into it was a stylised snake, complete with small chips of green stone for the eyes. The top had a silver loop through it, as though it was meant for a chain.

“Ginny told us what she got you and we thought we’d complete it. You’re a Gryffindor, but I heard you could speak Parseltongue, so I hope you don’t mind the snake carving.”

“No, it looks great,” said Harry, studying the fang. “What species did this come from?”

“Hungarian Horntail.”

“Wow,” Harry breathed, appreciating the irony. The dragon from the fourth task had taken a chunk out of him, but how he had a chunk of the same type of dragon. “I heard that they’re vicious.”

“One of the worst. I’ve seen one of them, a nesting mother, shoot fire forty feet. Damn well set me on fire! That’s how I got this burn,” he rolled up his leather trouser leg and pointed out a round burn scar. Harry grinned inwardly – he thought he knew which dragon Charlie was talking about.

“Anyway, tell me how you killed this Basilisk, if you don’t mind me asking.”

Harry, who had been busy attaching the fang to his silver chain, looked up and launched into the ‘true’ story of how he had killed the monster. He may have changed it slightly, but the true story was a bit risky to tell if he wanted to keep his cover. He smiled as he noticed Bill unsubtly listening in on the story, evidently trying to get the measure of Harry. The brothers proved to be good listeners, and asked a good number of intelligent questions about the fight and also told him some good stories of their own, about ancient tombs and ferocious dragons.

Harry knew a storm was brewing, and Voldemort would soon reveal himself. But right now he was prepared to sit with his adoptive family on a sunny afternoon and just talk with someone who was more his age. He felt he’d earned it.

Chapter 11 – Locomotion Commotion

Dear Harry,

I have received disturbing news. Cornelius, not content with removing me from various positions of power, has begun to pass Educational Decrees, which I believe happened in the future you experienced.

He has appointed his own Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Dolores Umbridge, and attempted to have Dementors positioned on school grounds. I was unable to stop him forcing Dolores upon me, but I firmly denied the Dementors access to Hogwarts or Hogsmeade. In the present climate it would be far too easy for Voldemort to bend them to his advantage, even before considering my own personal dislike of the creatures. They, however, may make patrols of public locations. As a precaution I have ensured Order members on watch duty all know how to perform the Patronus charm, as you have specified in your last letter.

On the subject of Voldemort, he is still keeping a low profile. Severus has reported that he is planning something “big” to announce his return to the Wizarding world, but reports that it is a strike on Azkaban rather than the school. You mentioned in your last letter that you are doing some covert training along with your daily exercise. I see this as wise.

The Express today would prove to be a tempting target for him, but the Order is sure no harm will befall the children. I’m sure that in the event of an emergency you would be able to defend the train long enough for help to arrive – positioning Order guards onto it with the Ministry in its current level of paranoia is too risky. Simply request the driver to send for help, and help will arrive as soon as is humanly possible.

Best Wishes.

A.D

P.S: Your friend Miss Granger attempted to apply for a Time Turner, a request which I'm afraid I denied. I feel that it would put too much stress on her during these difficult times.

Harry quickly ignited the letter Fawkes had just brought him and vanished the ash – it would not do to have another occupant of the Burrow read its contents. The thought of having Umbridge in the school made him feel sick, a burning hot anger that blazed in his chest. The woman was despicable, a hair's breadth from being a Death Eater herself. He felt impotent at the Burrow, simply waiting for Voldemort to play his hand so the war could truly begin and Harry could move into a more active role. Half of him almost hoped that Death Eaters would attack the Express, simply so he could have something to do.

Lost in his thoughts, he knelt and stuffed the last of his clothes into his battered trunk, finally forcing the lid of it shut with a final click, which snapped him from graphic thoughts of revenge on Umbridge. He quickly gave himself a once over in the mirror, checking that his new polo shirt and jeans looked fine. A quick tap of each finger confirmed that the rings he had purchased were in place, as he had decided to wear them full time under a simple disillusionment charm. He patted his side pocket to check his Phoenix-stone, as he had dubbed it mentally, was secure. He would be taking no chances with this trip.

"Harry! Harry! Come down, we have to go!" shouted a voice from below him.

"Coming!" he yelled back, dragging his trunk across Ron's untidy bedroom floor and out into the landing. He made it down the stairs in one piece (barely – the stairs outside Fred and George's room were lethally rickety) and emerged into the kitchen, a hive of chaos. Ginny was stuffing toast into her mouth in an un-ladylike manner while Bill and Charlie fenced using spatulas, with Ron cheering them on as the implements clacked together like horse's hooves. Mrs Weasley stood out in the garden, directing Mr Weasley with bringing out the luggage.

"Harry, mate, you're cutting it pretty fine!" said Charlie jokingly as Bill's spatula managed to wallop him squarely on the forehead. He

grinned at his brother and they both ducked outside to help their parents while Fred and George made their entrance, banging into Harry, who was standing in the way of the door.

“Shift, Harry, we’re going to be late!”

Harry shrugged at Ron, who grabbed the last forlorn piece of toast from the table and headed out into the sunny front garden with him. The Weasleys were travelling to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ via Muggle cabs, which had yet to arrive. Finally they managed to pile all of the luggage and Hedwig’s cage up in an untidy pile, waiting for the nondescript cabs to arrive, which they did in short order. The pair of drivers looked decidedly apprehensive at having to take so many odd objects (thankfully they had thought to shrink the brooms and put them in the trunks), but the promise of money was a powerful one, so they loaded up their vehicles.

Harry, Ron, Bill and Charlie travelled in one of the cabs, with the rest of the Weasleys journeying in the other. Mr Weasley had slipped Mrs Weasley some calming draught earlier in the morning, which seemed to stop her noticing Percy’s absence as much. During the trip Bill cast a discreet privacy ward between them and the driver so that they could talk freely, and the main topic of discussion was Quidditch. Truth be told, Harry didn’t think he would be staying on the house team; he didn’t have the time to worry about sports. He didn’t dare voice his opinions in a car full of Quidditch fanatics however, but made sure to avoid talking of Gryffindor’s chances that year.

They reached King’s Cross in good time, having a good half an hour before the train left with which to gather themselves and greet friends. Tipping the cabbies generously, the ensemble of redheads and Harry walked merrily into the modern, glass roofed station, which reminded him strongly of a cocoon. They subtly angled towards the disguised magical barrier and went through it in pairs, Harry and Ron going through last.

Harry emerged into a cloud of thick steam, a typical characteristic of Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ on September 1st. Figures flitted in and out of the fog from the gleaming red train like ghosts, and Harry stuck to the Weasleys as best he could, only pausing to nod or greet a

housemate or friend who burst from the impenetrable steam. He caught sight of Neville on the far side of the platform, talking quietly to his grandmother, and, to his anger, Lucius Malfoy, who was talking to Draco. The Weasleys began to load their luggage onto a middle carriage as Harry stared intently at Lucius, until the older aristocratic man finally turned to look at him through the bustling crowd. Harry gave him a look of hatred, while Lucius replied with an irritating smirk.

Harry loathed the blonde aristocrat, he really did. With that, he turned to mount the train and receive a hug and kiss from Mrs Weasley, who looked teary-eyed as she surveyed her children. Hermione hadn't shown up yet, or so it seemed, so Harry and Ron set off to find a compartment in the last carriage, which they managed fairly quickly, as not many people had got onto the train yet. They sat in relative silence, peering out at the passers-by through the mist from the Express, waving occasionally to people they recognised. Harry tried to block out the memories of the people he was looking at dying, screaming in the burning ruin of their school as the world fell apart around him. He was trying to put the past behind him in that sense, but he couldn't forget entirely.

"Harry, Ron! How are you!" said a familiar voice, and Harry whipped his head around to see Hermione framed in the doorway, a big smile on her face and a trunk trailing behind her. Her hair was as bushy as ever, and she still looked oddly young in Harry's eyes, but it was still Hermione. She didn't look particularly different from the end of the previous year, bar slightly straighter teeth. Harry found it odd that they still stuck out in an overbite, but reasoned she had not shrunk them yet. She gave him and Ron a quick hug, admiring Harry's dragon fang, and they gave her a rundown of their holidays in return. She had received only some of the information of Voldemort's return in their letters, communication not being all that safe, so most of it was news to her. Frankly she didn't look as worried as Harry thought she should be, then again, she was only thirteen and couldn't possibly understand the threat he posed.

"I suppose Dumbledore will be able to defeat You-Know-Who and his followers with this Order of the Phoenix you just told me about," she reasoned. "After all, you said there are more of the Order than there were the first time around, and they're better organised. And isn't

Hogwarts safe? Dumbledore was the only one You-Know-Who ever feared, after all.”

Harry wanted to agree with her logic, but knew for all her intelligence Hermione was wrong on this occasion. Voldemort wouldn't be deterred for long by Hogwarts' formidable reputation, just as he wasn't in the previous timeline. When it came down to it, a concerted assault on the ancient castle would probably see it come clattering down, along with the hopes of the Wizarding world. Not to mention that it would have to be him who killed Voldemort, not Dumbledore.

Then again, Harry was stronger than he was the first time around, and he had the crucial element of surprise over his foe. However he still couldn't shake the nagging doubt in the back of his mind, the one that made him think he wouldn't be good enough, and that he would fail the Wizarding World like he had before. He had, after all, never beaten his nemesis in a fight...

His contemplative pessimism was dispelled when Neville asked if he could have a seat, which the trio readily agreed to. Harry idly lay back and waited for the train to depart while listening to what had happened on his friend's holidays; apparently Neville had spent it making a greenhouse while Hermione had educated her parents on Voldemort. Each to their own, he thought to himself absently as the train's whistle blew shrilly and the train rolled out of the station, Mrs Weasley and Mr Weasley waving frantically until it was out of sight.

Ooo
oooooooooooooO

Harry had dozed off shortly after the train had departed – he was feeling strangely tired after all the explaining he and Ron had done for Hermione. No one else had entered their compartment bar the sweets-trolley witch, which made for a welcome change from Malfoy poking his nose in. The Express was rolling through a picturesque section of countryside, flat grass on each side which was peppered with small woods and hedges with a dusting of flowers; greenery as far as the eye could see; they were about half-way through the journey.

Harry drifted back into consciousness, but kept his eyes closed. He listened to the murmuring in the compartment, but perked up when he realised it was about him.

“He was a bit weird this summer,” Ron whispered conspiratorially to Hermione. “Bit... distant, you know? More like Bill or Charlie. And he kept using all this long words and stuff, wasn’t like Harry at all. And he keeps spending time in his room alone, and I saw him with Bill’s old books...”

“Maybe he’s just been reading a bit, unlike you Ronald,” Hermione replied fussily. “Honestly, if Harry is just being a bit more mature than you then I don’t think it’s much to worry about. Although I think we do need to keep an eye on him, with You-Know-Who being back and all.”

“I dunno, Hermione. Maybe he’s just stressed or something,” Neville said. Harry wondered about his lack of reaction to Voldemort being back, but reasoned Ron and Hermione could have told him while he had been asleep. Irritation flashed through him like a burst of fire; had he given them permission to blab secrets that he had entrusted to them? He calmed himself down as best he could, reasoning that they were only children, after all.

Harry brushed their superficial comments aside about his behaviour; they were completely correct, and he would have to come clean to them eventually, despite wanting to keep them out of the war.

He then realised that he needed the toilet as a matter of urgency; perhaps drinking the water Bill had brought for the cab journey in one go hadn’t been the best idea. Waking up gently and politely excusing himself, he walked down to the facilities in the middle coach they were in, ignoring the wide-eyed first years who occupied some of the compartments. He locked himself in the small cubicle and went about his business quickly before checking himself over in the small grubby mirror above the wash basin. He certainly didn’t look bad, but still a bit... boring, for the person supposed to save the Wizarding world. Perhaps I should ditch the glasses, he thought to himself idly.

It was at that moment that there was a tremendous screeching sound, like a banshee being tortured, and the train came to a short and definitely unplanned halt. Harry was knocked off balance and smashed his head into the mirror, shattering the glass and his spectacles as he did so, and swore viciously.

“What the fucking hell was that?” he spat while quickly running his wand over his face to heal the cuts he had sustained and repair his cracked glasses, and he then carefully brushed the broken glass from his person. He checked he had everything still in his pockets and opened the door of the cubicle a crack, and saw that everyone in every compartment in his vision was peering out of the window; some of the younger ones were crying in shock. Harry quietly exited the bathroom and looked out of the carriage door he was next to, his heart beginning to pound in his chest. What he saw thrilled and scared him at the same time.

Ten Death Eaters, robed and masked, standing solemnly like sentinels on the right side of the train, evenly spaced along the Express’ entire length. He guessed that there were probably ten more on the other side too; the situation definitely wasn’t as good as it could have been.

Harry quickly shut himself back into the bathroom, feeling as though he was being shocked with electricity. Death Eaters were attacking the school train, forcing innocents into the war from the start. Forcing himself to remain calm, he quickly brainstormed ideas. He had several options: fight, send a message to Dumbledore for help, or try to get the train moving again. A few seconds of deliberation were all he needed as he reached into his pocket for the smooth texture of the Phoenix-stone. He would fight, but also try to get the message off. He felt a calm come upon him, the anticipation of a conflict.

It was time the Death Eaters knew who they were messing with.

Ooo
ooooooooooooO

Avery chuckled darkly as he surveyed the train with an imperious gaze. This was going to be too easy. The scarlet steam engine had

been stopped by simply killing the driver, a morbidly obese Squib. The Dark Lord preferred subtlety, but since when had subtlety ever sent a message?

The Death Eaters were back, and the Mudbloods had better start running.

To his right Thorfinn Rowle, a beast of a man, growled softly as he cracked his knuckles. The Carrows, ugly as sin behind their masks, giggled softly, relishing the looks of horror on the students' faces. The remaining six were new recruits, taken from the scum and detritus of humanity that littered Knockturn Alley. The Dark Lord had been displeased with the group who had caused the ruckus in Diagon Alley, and consequently discipline amongst the rookies had increased. On the far side of the train Gibbon and Selwynn commanded a group made up almost entirely of fresh recruits. All of them were masked and anonymous, which added to their mystique.

Avery was confident. Who ever heard of children overpowering trained killers? Their orders were to kill the Mudbloods on the train and do what they liked with any of the half-bloods. If possible Potter was to be captured, despite Avery not knowing precisely why. Then again, he knew better to disobey the Dark Lord. The Phoenix, that mysterious masked figure who had been spotted around the country, was also an object of the Master's attention, but not the focus of the mission. The objective was strictly hit and run, but Avery had already decided to try to take down any foolish Aurors who interfered – anything to earn his Master's trust.

"Hold your positions," he barked sharply. "Let them tremble in fear. Alec, secure the engine. Ensure that the driver is dead and that no one enters it. Everyone else, wait for my signal to attack."

A chubby, squat Death Eater moved from the ranks to the scarlet steam engine and, with an unfeminine grunt, tugged the body of the driver from it onto the ground with a sick thud, the corpse hitting the ground like a sack of potatoes. Avery smiled as he heard some of the younger children begin to cry at the sight, their sobs muffled by the glass windows.

He would give them a few minutes to collect themselves, and then he would order the massacre.

Ooo
ooooooooooooO

“Vestum!” Harry whispered, feeling the familiar rush of power and painful shin extensions that accompanied his transformation into his alter ego. He looked down at the carpeted floor into a large shard of mirror; a hooded, unidentifiable figure looked back at him. Perfect.

He apparated out of the cramped bathroom into the Prefects carriage near the front of the train; he had a split-second to take in the plush, open plan space with comfortable couches and a small selection of food and drink before a wand was shoved rudely into his face.

“Freeze, Death... oh holy shit!” said a familiar voice. Harry took advantage of the wand owner’s hesitation, grabbing the boy’s wrist and twisting it away in a deft movement designed to use the boy’s weight against him. He knew the boy was stronger than he was at the moment, a fifth year by the look of him, but if he needed to he could use the strength-enhancement ring he was wearing.

He studied the boys face, then nearly choked in shock. It was Cedric Diggory, and he had a look of shock on his face that mirrored Harry’s, had anyone been able to see under his hood. “Kill the spare” echoed in Harry’s mind, and he felt like he’d been punched in the gut. The first person Harry remembered seeing die stared him in the face, looking scared but very much alive.

“It’s the Phoenix!” a girl yelled behind him. Harry let go of Cedric’s wrist gently, and backed up slightly to see who he was dealing with, wincing slightly at the pain the leg transformations brought on. He quickly brushed aside his surprise at seeing Diggory – now was not the time. There were sixteen prefects, fifth and sixth years, and a seventh year; the Head Girl. His stomach jolted as he realised Percy was absent as the Head boy. Harry only recognised Cedric, but then again, he didn’t really need to know who anyone was apart from the Head Girl. They bunched up in a group as he turned to look at them, as if he could attack at any moment.

"You," he said, pointing at the Head Girl and trying to seize the initiative, "how far are we from the front of the train?"

"Umm... its just in front of this carriage, but the door into it is locked," the Head Girl, a pretty Indian girl who was looking surprisingly calm, replied. "What do you intend to do? Arn't you supposed to be working for them?" Harry noticed that every person in the Prefect's carriage had their wand out. He decided to try his hand at diplomacy.

"If I wanted you dead, I would have killed you before you had even realised I was here. Now, listen to me and you might make it out of this alive. I'm going to see if this train has any defences, and try to contact the headmaster and the DMLE. You need to disperse yourselves throughout the train and try to get the sixth and seventh years to organise a defence. You won't stand a chance against the Death Eaters in a straight fight, but trying to stop them getting onto the train is a lot easier. If things get rough, just run. I'm going to try to get us all out of this mess, but I can't promise miracles." Harry's voice was magically deeper than normal, and he was pleased with the confidence it projected.

"Who the hell says we should trust you?" said one of the prefects, a snobby looking Slytherin. "Like Nisha said, you're working for them!"

"Christ, don't argue! I'm probably the only chance you have, moron. Like I said, if I wanted you dead, I'd have killed you. Now get moving!" Harry barked, relishing in the authority he wielded, the rush of power. The prefects jumped slightly and obediently, yet nervously, filed out of the carriage to try to help the students, while Harry turned to the back door of the carriage, and tried to open it. Like the Head Girl had said, it was locked. Harry quickly used Alohomora to get it open, with no success. Evidently the driver wasn't to be disturbed by anyone but the tea lady. Finally, in a fit of frustration, he spoke the words to activate his strength ring and punched at the space just above the handle.

To his shock, his hand went straight through the thick wood as though it were paper. He didn't feel any different, but evidently the silver ring was working. Disreputable though he may be, Borgin sold

quality stuff when you had the money for it. He quietly deactivated it; mindful of the warnings Borgin had told him about harming himself while using them.

He swung the door open to reveal a chubby Death Eater heaving the body of the huge driver out of the cramped cabin. It contained a small chair, several levers marked with speeds, two large red buttons and one entrance outside, which was currently blocked by the Death Eater. He studied the intruder's bulging profile with distaste, and recognised Alecko Carrow, a despicable sadist and one of the only female Death Eaters. She turned, her twisted face thankfully covered by a smooth white mask, and stopped in shock. Harry saw a vague image of himself in the mask's slightly reflective surface; red robed with hypnotic flames, standing tall and imposing.

"Good evening, Miss Carrow. I believe you have a pressing appointment."

"With what? Who the hell are you?" Someone, Harry thought, hasn't been paying attention to the news.

"I? I am the Phoenix. And your backside has an urgent, overdue appointment with the solid ground outside."

Carrow snarled behind her mask and raised her blackthorn wand quicker than Harry would have thought possible, but she was too late. Harry kicked her in the chest, causing her to stagger and cling to the entrance to the cabin for support, and then nailed her with a Blasting curse from his wand. She sailed out of the door with a howl and a sizzle of burning flesh, crashing into the grassy turf outside with a satisfying crunch. Harry grinned to himself.

He ignored the shouts of surprise from the Death Eaters outside and quickly scanned the control panel in front of the chair. The levers were mainly for controlling the train, but the buttons intrigued him. One was marked Compartment Locks and the other was marked Emergency. He pressed the Compartment Locks button with a gloved hand and heard a loud clicking sound as every door in the train locked itself. Perfect, he thought, that should buy the students some time. He was about to press the second button when he noticed

movement in the corner of his vision, and was abruptly tugged very rudely from the cabin by his ankles by the largest Death Eater he had ever seen, jostling the levers on the control panel as he did so, and inadvertently starting the train up again in a billow of steam and the shriek of a whistle.

He thudded into the steps leading up the cabin and hit the ground hard, still in the grip of the Death Eater. Overcoming his surprise, Harry lunged for his wand, which had fallen onto the ground when he had been grabbed, only to have his arm stood upon by a second Death Eater, causing a stab of pain to shoot up his wrist.

Bugger, Harry thought wisely. Shouldn't have been too overconfident there. He squinted against the bright sunlight as he looked down the business end of the Death Eaters' wands. The smell of dirt and fresh grass filled his nostrils, and he tried not to sneeze.

"Hello, Phoenix. Our Master has taken special interest in you, seeing as you are intent on foiling our glorious conquests. Unfortunately for you, he doesn't mind if you're dead or alive." The Death Eater said mockingly, grinding Harry's arm under his foot.

Harry inched his hand into his cloak, his ankles still stuck fast by the massive Death Eater at his feet. He groped for a moment until he found the smooth butt of his handgun.

The Death Eater standing above him (was it Avery? Harry thought he recognised the voice), opened his mouth to utter the two words which would end Harry's life.

Harry took advantage of the fact that the fools hadn't thought of pinning his other arm and knocked the wand roughly aside with his palm, withdrawing his gun with the same hand in one deft movement. He sat up quickly, stomach muscles stretching in protest, and brought the gun butt down onto the head of the massive Death Eater, who was positioned by his ankles, causing the man to howl in pain and stagger back. Once he was free, he rolled away from his enemies and grabbed his wand, getting to his feet on the grass beside the train.

Which was moving. Harry quickly checked around him for other Death Eaters. The seven others on the right side of the train were either watching him or watching the moving train, waiting for the signal to attack. Carrow was getting up some distance away, rubbing her chest (not a pretty sight) and looking for her wand.

“Attack, you fools!” shouted Avery, training his wand again on Harry. The second Death Eater, who was looking dazed, pulled out his wand as well, forcing Harry to dive to one side. From the other side of the locomotive Harry heard the sounds of spellfire, cracking wood and breaking glass with bursts of energy. Evidently the Death Eaters had decided to launch a salvo at the side of the train. Harry cursed and continued to roll on the turf, spells impacting where he had been moments before and sending up small fountains of dirt and rock. The remaining Death Eaters, including Alecko, had decided that the Phoenix was more fun to shoot at than the train packed with schoolchildren.

“Contengo!” Harry cried, pointing his wand at the ground and rolling into a crouch. A red shield blossomed around him, absorbing two spells that would have hit his unprotected back. Avery, Alecko, and the huge Death Eater were ahead of him and the remainder were behind him, casting spells into his back. The train was passing quicker now, beginning to gather speed. He was already level with the second-last carriage; soon he would be exposed to the ten Death Eaters on the other side, who were still firing spells into the coaches.

Harry grunted, gritting his teeth slightly in the effort of maintaining the shield against the multiple impacts of spellfire. He had to get to the main engine and push the Emergency button, as this certainly qualified as one. Apparition into such a small moving space would be lethal, and he needed to keep tabs on the Death Eaters. He glanced up at the beige carriage rushing past him, full of schoolchildren watching him be pummelled by a plethora of spells, and noticed a ladder on the section where the last carriages joined each other rushing along to meet him. Harry whispered the words needed to activate his golden speed ring, and smiled when the world appeared to slow slightly, spells becoming threads of vibrant light, and the train moving at a sedentary walking pace.

He dropped his scarlet defence, holstered his wand and pistol, and leapt for the ladder as it slowly drew level, deactivating the ring as he grabbed the smooth metal in his hands. Avery tossed another Killing Curse, which detonated against the train, narrowly missing Harry's head and showering him with splinters. As he climbed the relatively short ladder, Harry pulled his pistol out again and started to fire wildly over his shoulder. He smirked when he heard a scream from one of the anonymous Death Eaters; there was one down for a while. Finally, after what seemed like a ridiculously long time to have his back exposed, Harry reached the top of the ladder and climbed onto the carriage's flat roof.

Wind blew into his eyes and whipped his red cloak up in a billowing mess that rivalled Snape's trademark cloak. He crawled inch by inch onto the smooth metal roof, which was roughly the size of a large duelling arena, and attempted to stand.

Twelve curses from both sides, all of them narrowly missing him, convinced him that laying down was the best course of action. He was on the last coach of the train, and the train itself was moving at a moderate speed; enough that someone could stand up, but any turns would send said person careering off. Harry rolled onto his back and breathed out, trying to gather himself before he tried to crawl along the roof to reach the steam engine at the front.

The huge Death Eater apparated unsteadily into his field of vision, blocking out the sun with his colossal bulk. Harry reacted instantly, bringing his fist up into the Death Eater's crotch. The man yelled in agony and grabbed at his injured parts, stumbling and finally falling ungracefully over the edge of the roof. Harry quickly got to his feet, swaying slightly in the wind, and pulled out both of his weapons.

He quickly checked what was happening behind the train. The majority of the Death Eaters were firing ineffectually at the rear of the train, their spells missing or doing no discernable damage. As he watched they slowly got further and further away, and the one he was sure was Avery rounded up the twenty-odd Death Eaters, one of whom was clutching his arm in pain, and spoke to them quickly. Two of them went to tend to their fallen comrade, who was lying

motionless on the ground by the tracks, while the rest of them turned to apparate.

Harry heard several sharp cracks behind him, and twirled round while conjuring a silver Protego shield. His swiftness was rewarded as three spells slammed into the barrier with a deep ringing noise, before Harry lowered it and aimed his weapons at the three Death Eaters standing behind him on the second-last coach, in an arrowhead formation. Cold fury erupted in Harry; he felt a need to finish this before someone got hurt.

“Avada Kedavra!” he spat, aiming at the one on the left, as he pumped the trigger on his pistol, feeling it jerk in his hand as it fired. The green Killing Curse, accompanied by a howling wind which was audible over the noise of the train, struck true, driving the life from the Death Eater it hit and causing his ragdoll-like corpse to slide from the roof of the train. The Death Eater in the middle was hit in the stomach by a bullet and doubled over in agony, dropping his wand. Showing a surprising amount of foresight, the man on the right blocked the bullet fired at him with a blue shield and replied with a Avada Kedavra of his own, forcing Harry to disapparate and appear, off-balance, right where the Death Eater he had hit with the Killing Curse had stood.

“Confringo!” he yelled from his advantageous position, sending the Death Eater who was wounded in the stomach flying forward off of the train with an ugly red smoking burn on his back, leaving the stench of burnt flesh behind. He dealt with the final one by simply moving and deftly shoulder-barging the surprised man in the side, sending him tumbling to his death from the speeding locomotive.

Harry paused to catch his breath and regain his balance, feeling adrenaline shoot through his veins and energise his body. He felt alert, the frustration borne of the repetitive cycle of Quidditch and immature redheads that he had endured for the previous weeks washed away in a wave of battle-lust. This was what he had been wishing for that morning in the Burrow; something to take him from the monotony of life with a family who he now felt he didn’t really know. At least when he was killing Death Eaters he had some form of purpose.

He turned to keep walking along the roof he was on, seeing that he had a good five or so carriages to traverse, yet no Death Eaters in sight. He had dispatched four at least, so there should have been around sixteen left, but instead there were none in sight. The midday sun was obscured behind clouds as the Express obliviously chugged along through a picturesque landscape of fields, the occasional tree growing close to the tracks flying past in a blur of brown and green.

Harry's blood ran cold as he hopped nimbly to the next roof, and heard the sound of screams from an open window below him. The remaining sixteen Death Eaters had apparently broken into the train.

"Fuck!" he yelled, his words lost to the whistling wind, as he turned and disappeared into the carriage below him – a very risky manoeuvre, but he had little other option. The red-carpeted enclosure was strewn with broken glass and struggling bodies as several Death Eaters smashed windows and dragged screaming children out of their compartments. Before his eyes a thin Death Eater casually slashed a second-year's back and legs with a spell, laughing cruelly as the boy cried out in pain from shallow red slices in his calves. Nearly everyone stopped moving once Harry arrived and stopped himself falling over from the Apparition movement, and the four Death Eaters standing in the corridor seized their victims - mainly frightened second years - and held them roughly by their necks, wands trained at their temples.

"Drop your weapons you bastard, or we'll kill them!" shouted the thin one. Harry gave him a baleful glare from under his hood and muttered the activation key for his speed-enhancing ring. Time slowed for him as he brought his gun to bear, firing four well-aimed shots followed quickly by a vicious set of Bone-Breaking curses to tag any survivors. The Death Eaters were hit by the bullets almost instantaneously in the cramped conditions, and the ones who hadn't been killed by the gunfire were struck in the face by the curses, their heads crumpling like paper bags in unsettling slow motion. Harry undid the enchantment, feeling a stabbing pain in his chest that didn't feel entirely natural to add to the twinges in his legs. The blood-splattered children looked horrified as their captors slid to the ground,

blood leaking from their crushed noses and their faces sagging in a way that would have been comical had they not been dead.

Harry spared a glance over his shoulder through the window of the door linking the previous coaches – they were devoid of Death Eaters, to his relief, albeit in a bit of a mess from the spells fired into them earlier. He motioned for the traumatised second years to get out of his way (he could see that their injuries were hardly life-threatening), which they did without hesitation, and he sprinted over his foes' corpses and gave the door into the next carriage a violent kick assisted by a Reducto from his wand, propelling it halfway down the corridor in a cloud of splinters and dust. There were also no Death Eaters in this one, much to his relief. He was beginning to tire from his exertions, and knew that he could not yet win a large-scale fight with his current body.

The next carriage also looked empty, so Harry advanced slowly, his eyes peeled underneath his hood and his teeth bared behind his bandana. As he approached the first compartment, whose door was mysteriously open, there was an apparition crack behind him and a voice hissed "Crucio!"

Harry collapsed, yelling in agony as the Cruciatus Curse hit him square in the back. He writhed and flailed on the floor, fighting the white-hot pain with all his might as his wand and gun fell from scrabbling fingers, his flesh feeling like it was being peeled off with hot knives dipped in acid. He managed to turn his head to face his aggressor; it was Alecto Carrow. Through his pain-filled haze he realised that the thin man who he had just killed had probably been her brother, Amycus, as the Death Eater had fitted the memory Harry had of him.

Pity, he thought. Finally he managed to gain enough control over his erratic motor functions to roll sideways, breaking Carrow's connection with the curse. Harry, from his position on the floor, kicked out at her legs and grabbed his gun, bringing it to bear as she screeched and clutched at her right shin when he slammed his foot into it. He trained his weapon on her but she disappeared with one last furious look from behind her featureless mask. Cursing from the post-Cruciatus aches, Harry got to his feet and staggered past the oddly vacant

compartments into the next, and second-last, carriage, the one before the prefects compartment.

This one was also empty, both of students and Death Eaters, and Harry had to wonder where everyone had gone. He disillusioned himself and cautiously approached the closed, un-windowed, door into the Prefects carriage and opened it gently, his wand raised and his gun in his other hand. As soon as he had opened it a crack, the door exploded with a deafening bang, slamming Harry painfully into the ground and causing him to smack his head into the wall of the coach, sending him swiftly into unconsciousness.

AN: I've had some reviews saying that Harry basically isn't being badass or military enough. While I know he could disillusion himself and wipe out the Death Eaters that way, or be a brutal silent killing machine who uses nothing but AKs, that doesn't make for the most fun writing. Also, I'm still working along the lines that his child body is affecting his mind – he isn't physically mature. Bear with me on this, that particular plotline will be resolved...

Chapter 12 – The best laid plans...

As soon as he had opened it a crack, the door exploded with a deafening bang, slamming Harry painfully into the ground and causing him to smack his head into the wall of the coach, sending him into unconsciousness.

[illegible]

Several minutes earlier...

"I'm just off to the toilet," Harry muttered, having recently woken up from his slumber. Ron nodded absent-mindedly and helped himself to another chocolate frog, biting down on the chocolate with aplomb. Harry left the compartment and Ron looked out of the window at the scenic countryside passing by as Hermione and Neville talked about the classes they were taking that year; frankly, Ron thought Hermione worked too hard.

He munched happily on the rest of his frog and glanced at the card – Dumbledore again. He was beginning to feel like he would never get Agrippa at the rate he was going.

However he was distracted from his chocolate-frog centred thoughts by the train slamming its magically-enhanced brakes on, causing Ron to fly from his seat into Neville, who was sitting opposite. Cursing, he untangled himself from his friend and looked out of the window, ignoring Hermione's urgent queries as to whether everyone was alright.

What he saw made him squeak with terror. Death Eaters. It was like a nightmare, his worst dreams come true. Those impassive monsters had been one of his chief fears since his parents had told him of You-Know-Who's return – if he was honest with himself he hadn't truly believed You-Know-Who was back until now.

And where the hell was Harry?

“Ron, Ron! There are Death Eaters outside!” Hermione moaned in terror. “Where on earth is Harry? We need to get him and lock ourselves in this carriage!”

“Blimey, Hermione, but there’s Death Eaters right there!” Ron replied, feeling a pang of fear in his gut. Neville had gone completely white and was gripping a pumpkin pasty like it was a Portkey to safety. Deep down Ron knew Hermione was right; but then again, she always was. Hermione brushed the detritus of their snacking off of herself and quickly but cautiously opened the compartment door, Ron right behind her. Neville nervously volunteered to guard the compartment – Ron cursed himself mentally for not thinking of that excuse.

Come on Weasley, where’s your Gryffindor courage? he thought to himself as they inched down the carriage towards the toilets, moving past compartments full of terrified people. Ron could see the Death Eaters were on the other side of the train to – they were surrounded. Hermione reached the toilet doors and began knocking firmly on the only occupied one – but there was no reply. She knocked harder and began to call Harry’s name, but there was no reply.

“Hermione, he might be knocked out or something! Reckon we should get a prefect?”

“We should go to them anyway, they’re the only ones who know how to unlock these doors. Come on and be quiet – we don’t want the Death Eaters to realise we’re here.”

Ron swallowed and nodded, glancing out the window by the toilets and seeing the Death Eaters still outside. Hermione jogged off down the carriage, and Ron followed her, passing compartments full of petrified students, some locking their compartment doors and others whispering frantically to their friends. They passed through several carriages in quick succession, before coming to the one before the Prefects’ carriage and seeing the Prefects themselves, led by the Head Girl, pile out, looking frightened.

“Thank goodness!” said Hermione, breathless from the journey up the train, “Where’s the driver and trolley lady? What’s happening outside?”

We need help getting our friend out of the toilets, we think he's unconscious!"

The Head Girl, leading the group of Prefects squashed into the narrow corridor, frowned. "We've got someone helping us, don't worry. The trolley lady is in her private area right at the rear of the train. You're too young to help us you two, go back to your compartments and lock the door, we'll try to help your friend in a minute." As she said that, the train resounded with the sound of clicking as, one by one, the doors all locked themselves. "... Or we could do that." The Head girl said, scratching her head.

"Nisha, we should try to get people into the Prefects' carriage, its larger," said a Prefect behind her, Ron was sure his name was Cedric. The Head girl nodded and glanced out the window, seeing the Death Eaters remaining motionless.

"Right. You two," she pointed at Ron and Hermione, "go get into the Prefects' carriage, unlock it with Alohomora. Prefects," she looked over her shoulder, "come with me and get as many people as possible into the Prefects' carriage.

"Alright," Ron agreed before Hermione could protest, grabbing her hand and squeezing through the crowd of Prefects to the door at the back, which was locked. Hermione whispered the unlocking charm and they both entered, open-mouthed at the relative luxury of the compartment. Ron crossed to the food and drink and grabbed another Chocolate Frog, before Hermione frowned and pointed to the door at the back of the carriage.

"Something's punched through that door... agh!" she cried as the train lurched into motion abruptly. Food scattered onto the floor at the sudden movement, and Ron was thrown onto one of the couches. The train started slowly but began to pick up speed with every passing second. Ron stood up, helped Hermione to her feet, and peeked out of one of the windows to see the nearest Death Eaters firing at something he couldn't see, multicoloured jets of light whizzing just out of sight. He turned around to speak to Hermione and saw through the other window that the Death Eaters were aiming at the train.

“Hermione! Look out!” he cried, grabbing her and ducking just as a yellow spell slammed into the window with a shriek, sending glass all over the carpeted floor and nearest couches. They yelled in terror as a second spell stuck further down with a bang, breaking more glass and upending the table with food on it. I wish Percy were here, or Bill or Charlie, Ron thought to himself as the windows shattered and Hermione screamed. Percy should have been there.

The entrance to the carriage suddenly slammed open, allowing Prefects accompanied by frightened students of all years to enter in droves. The compartment quickly filled over the space of a few minutes with what looked like half the train piling in. Ron noticed Ernie Macmillan, Lee Jordan and Justin Finch-Fletchley among the crowd, but was quickly forced to the back, near the broken driver’s door. He couldn’t see the twins anywhere. Finally, the Head Girl entered and shut the door firmly behind her. The compartment was reasonably full, but Ron could see there were definitely people missing. Harry, for example.

“Students, you’re going to have to remain here with us. We managed to evacuate a few carriages but we saw Death Eaters apparate inside the train, so we couldn’t go any further,” said the Head Girl.

“What about our friends?” a second year demanded.

“They’re inside locked compartments, and help is on the way, don’t worry. We have to sit tight and guard this carriage for now.”

“What help?” said another person from the crowd. The Head girl paused for a moment before speaking and frowned slightly.

“Someone assigned to protect the train by Professor Dumbledore. Now, Prefects and upperclassmen to the front of the crowd please, closest to the door.” Her orders were quickly obeyed, leaving Ron and Hermione still stuck at the back.

“I’m still worried about Harry,” Hermione whispered to him.

“Same. He’ll be fine I reckon, no one will know he’s stuck in that toilet,” Ron muttered back, before falling silent along with the rest of the carriage. Several loud cracks were heard, like small fireworks, and there was a lot of shouting and banging over the noise of the train. The people at the front fingered their wands nervously as the minutes passed, until everyone jumped as a yell of pain was heard just outside the entrance to the carriage, along with banging noises that sounded like someone kicking the floor and walls. Ron strained his ears and heard the yells stop, followed by a woman crying out and a sharp crack of disappearance.

The Prefects and other students aimed their wands at the door, some of them visibly shaking in fear. Hermione grabbed Ron’s arm, and Ron stood on tiptoes to see over the sea of heads in front of him. One first year started crying as the silence stretched on, until the door began to creak open.

Every person with a wand on the door shouted a different spell, sending a rainbow of colour and a deafening burst of noise into the door of the carriage, blasting it and its frame apart in a spray of sparks and sending whoever was behind it hurtling down the corridor. Hermione squealed and clutched Ron’s arm painfully hard as the Head girl called for the spellcasters to stop and crept out of the room with some Prefects moving to cover the door behind her.

“What do you reckon they’ll find?” Hermione whispered frantically.

“I dunno...” Ron replied uncertainly.

Ooo
ooooooooooooO

Harry felt a sharp pain behind his eyes as he awoke, moaning reflexively and causing the girl leaning over him to squeak in fright and jump back. He opened his eyes and blinked blearily, seeing an unfocused person standing over him. He shifted himself from where he was lying uncomfortably against the wall of the compartment and groped for his wand and gun, which were lying next to him.

He picked up his wand and cast a quick charm on his head, smiling stiffly as the throbbing pain behind his eyes abated and his vision cleared. The Head Girl from earlier was the figure in front of him, and she looked worried.

"Are you alright?" the girl asked.

"Fine..." Harry muttered, before starting and checking himself. His outfit was still active, hood and all, and he still had both the rings on, which were Disillusioned despite his full-body charm wearing off. Calmed down somewhat, he unsteadily got to his feet, ignoring the transfiguration pains in his legs.

"What happened?" the Phoenix asked, thankful his voice spells were still intact.

"We... we thought you were a Death Eater and fired spells at you," said the Head Girl quickly. Harry started again. Death Eaters! There were Death Eaters attacking the train, he remembered now.

"Bugger, how long have I been out?"

"Couple of seconds?"

"Right. Who's in the Prefects' carriage?"

"We managed to evacuate about half the train into there, as its larger," supplied the girl nervously. "Are you alright? You don't look very steady."

"When you've been hit by the Cruciatus curse and hit by a dozen spells, you tell me how you feel," Harry muttered darkly, stepping over large splinters and moving past the gawping Prefects by the shattered door and into the room ahead of him, before stopping at the sight of dozens of students looking at him.

"It's the Phoenix!" some of them whispered, while others quietly withdrew their wands. Harry holstered his gun, but the Head Girl butted in before he had a chance to speak.

“He’s helping us,” she said loudly, “he’s the help I told you about.”

Harry scanned the crowd, picking out some familiar faces. He smiled under his bandana as he noticed Ron and Hermione right at the back, near the door. He glanced out of a broken window and noticed that the train was still rattling along at a fair clip, something which he needed to rectify.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to get to the driver’s cabin,” he announced, advancing through the crowd who parted as though desperate to avoid touching him. Harry walked quickly through them, ignoring the stares and whispers, and avoided looking at Ron as he passed him. He opened the broken driver’s door and entered the cramped cabin, shutting the broken door behind him.

The train’s lever was at nearly maximum from when he had been caught on it earlier, so Harry quickly moved it back, feeling the red train begin to slow. He then pressed the EMERGENCY button with aplomb, before looking out the front windows with relief.

What he saw made him go slack-jawed with horror.

A long bridge spanning a large glistening lake, with the rest of the Death Eaters clustered around where it met the tracks. Harry swore and shoved the train lever to its minimum, looking frantically on the panel for some form of emergency brakes. He found nothing and began to panic slightly, as the train wasn’t slowing nearly fast enough for his liking. He looked up again and saw the Death Eaters making hand signals and moving around, getting slowly closer.

Finally they all stood back, pointed their wands at the bridge, and fired several curses into the stonework of the viaduct, cracking and pulverising a large section and causing it to fall into the lake below. Harry swore again, still feeling sluggish from his torture and fighting. He jabbed the red button labelled EMERGENCY again, and went back into the Prefect’s carriage, which was still full of wide-eyed students.

“Did it work?” asked the Head Girl, pushing her way through the small crowd, “I felt the train begin to slow down.”

"We have a problem," Harry said. "I need you to move everyone out of this carriage and into ones further back. Don't try to help anyone, we don't have time. This train may be about to crash."

"Crash?"

"Did he say crash?"

"Oh my god!"

"Right," said the Head Girl over the whispers and cries of the crowd. Harry nodded sharply and turned back into the driver's cabin, shutting the door behind him to cut off the noise of frightened people leaving. He looked out of the front windows and saw that the Death Eaters had disappeared, leaving the broken bridge behind and, to Harry's disgust, the Dark Mark glittering in the sky. The train was dangerously close, and was still not slowing fast enough, having been going at maximum speed. Harry estimated that he had two or three minutes before they careened through the gap left by the Death Eaters and into the lake, which looked deceptively tranquil in the afternoon sun.

Harry made his decision, raised his wand, and disappeared, arriving by the broken bridge ahead. He could see the Express, broken in several places along its side, and still gushing snow-white steam as it chugged obliviously to its doom in a field in the north English countryside. Harry strode to the middle of the tracks, watching the train bear down on him under the Dark Mark with his face devoid of emotion.

The wind picked up as the several hundred tonnes of metal, flesh and steel bore down on him, causing his cloak to play around his booted feet. He raised his wand in his right hand, his other weapon holstered at his side.

He exhaled deeply, closed his green eyes, and focused.

"Arresto Momentum!" he roared, pointing his wand dead-straight at the scarlet steam engine which was a mere 100 metres from where he stood on the lip of the broken bridge. Rocks and pebbles flew

away from him as he expelled his power in an invisible beam, splashing softly into the lake behind him.

The front of the Express crumpled abruptly, metal tearing and wailing as it was contorted by the force of Harry's spell. Harry himself merely grunted and stood stock-still, sweating slightly as he poured power into the small stick in his hand. The engine of the Express was crushed by the magic, yet the train kept moving forward as its raw momentum carried it through. It got closer and closer, yet Harry refused to move from where he was standing. He began to sweat even more under the bright sunlight, and felt a small ache in his temple which started to grow the more he willed the train to stop. It was now fifty meters away from him, and still going despite its ruined locomotive, its wheels making a horrific screeching noise and spitting sparks.

Forty meters, Harry still focused on the stopping spell. The pain in his temple blossomed into a full-blown headache, yet he refused to move.

Thirty meters, his eyelids began to flutter as the screeching, steaming train refused to slow entirely. Behind him the lake's surface was churned into motion by some invisible force and the broken bridge began to crack further.

Twenty meters, his chest spiked with hot pain as he continued to force magic from him into the broken, limping train. The Dark Mark above him flickered and vanished under the pressure.

Ten meters, he began to smell ozone, steam and metal as the train came close enough to touch. The air became charged, like lightning was about to strike.

One meter, the train finally ground to a halt.

The broken, ruined train filled Harry's vision, which had dark spots dancing in it. Steam, black rather than white, spewed from in-between cracks and fissures in the metal remains and Harry coughed and hunched over as he struggled to remain standing. His hood slipped down and he scrabbled to do it back up and cover his face as the

distinctive cracks of Apparition resounded throughout the verdant field the train was in.

Harry stumbled off of the tracks, wheezing. His chest felt like it was on fire, and his head was throbbing like he had been hit with a sledgehammer. He saw vague figures, clad in Auror robes, swarm towards the train. As he backed up, he bumped into someone.

Albus Dumbledore, dressed in his usual garish flamboyance and with a broad smile on his face.

“We meet at last, Phoenix,” Dumbledore said softly as Harry straightened up and looked him in the eye. “You look slightly worse for wear.”

“You have no idea,” Harry said, his voice hoarse and the voice charms beginning to fail. His outfit was now bedraggled compared to earlier, and he was still coughing.

“I would advise vacating the area before my Auror companions decide to try to stop you. Madame Pomfrey will see to any injuries under my supervision.” He lowered his voice further. “And Harry? Thank you.”

Harry nodded and unsteadily disappeared back into the bathroom he had started in as quietly as possible, his feet crunching on broken glass as he slumped onto the toilet. He mumbled the words to remove his outfit and transfigurations, leaving him in a nondescript school uniform looking a bit ruffled with several bruises beginning to form. Inside he felt like shit. His vision was beginning to go as he tried to remain focused and see if anything incriminating was left on his person.

His last thought before he slipped into semi-unconsciousness was that Rita would have a hard time making the Phoenix look bad this time.

[illegible]

Someone knocked on the door, the noise sounding like a firecracker in the enclosed toilet. Harry jumped and groaned, feeling his neck stiffen uncomfortably and his headache slam into his senses with a vengeance. The lock clicked and the door unlocked, revealing a tall black Auror with a characteristic shaved head. Kingsley Shacklebolt.

He nodded at Harry and turned his head to call to someone out of sight. "We've found Potter! He was where those kids said he would be. C'mon, lets get you to the nurse," he said gently, stretching out a hand to help Harry to his feet and out of the cramped cubicle. Harry blinked blearily and glanced down the carriage; it was full of broken wood and glass from where the Death Eaters had fired spells into the train. Following Kingsley, he passed several muttering Aurors in red garb who were casting diagnostic spells on the holes in the walls and broken glass.

Outside the sun lanced into his eyes, causing him to curse and squint until his vision adjusted. The students were clustered into House groups on the grass, talking quietly, while some of the Hogwarts staff were on the scene talking to the Prefects; Harry could see the Heads of the various Houses, Dumbledore and Madame Pomfrey, who was tending to a small group of children, none of whom looked seriously injured. He noticed dispassionately that four corpses were covered with sheets further down the train; the Death Eaters he had killed inside the Express. Aurors swarmed over the train like ants, especially near the front, while others worked on repairing the bridge over the lake.

He saw another few students get lead off of the train as Kingsley smiled at him and nudged him in the direction of Madam Pomfrey, who waved him over as he trudged across the soft grass. She sat him down on a conjured seat and conjured a light at the end of her wand which she used to check his pupils, before tutting at the bruises she could see.

"Those Death Eaters... if I could get my hands on them. Were you banged about when the train stopped, dear?"

"Uhh... yeah, I hit the mirror and broke it, it was a bit rough for a bit."

"I understand. I'll just heal these bruises and you can be on your way, but you'll need a good night's sleep tonight."

Harry nodded and sat back as she set to work healing his various bruises and drank a sweet tasting (for once) potion which cleared up his head and vision. Feeling much better, he thanked her and walked over the field to the Gryffindor bunch, passing the Head girl and Dumbledore. He saw Percy talking to McGonagall, and nodded curtly at him, but got no reply.

He quickly spotted Ron and Hermione talking to the twins, looking worried. He pushed through the small crowd, nodding at people he knew, until he reached the four he was looking for.

"Harry!" Hermione squealed, hugging him tightly. "We were so worried!"

"You alright, mate? Did you go and see Pomfrey?" Ron asked, looking relieved that Harry was alright.

"Yeah I did, she patched me up. I was in the toilet and when the train stopped I hit my head and was out for a bit. What happened to the train? I heard there were Death Eaters!"

"Goodness Harry, it was so scary," Hermione said, shuddering. She launched into an overview of what had happened while Harry greeted the twins and pretended to listen intently. Eventually the crowds of students dispersed to their Heads of Houses, where they all grasped a long rope (house coloured, Harry noted) before being portkeyed away from the broken Express to Hogsmeade station. It was now later afternoon, a bit earlier than Harry was used to arriving, but it was beginning to darken. He smiled as he saw Hagrid, someone he hadn't greeted since time-travelling, and gave the half-giant a wave before following the crowd of students towards the Thestral-drawn carriages.

He paused before getting into his carriage, looking at the Thestrals. Every one of them was looking right at him, their dead, unblinking eyes scrutinising him. Harry looked around and saw a pint-sized Luna Lovegood (she looked even odder at twelve years old) looking at him as well before smiling and following her Ravenclaw friends. Harry

shuddered slightly and joined his friends in heading up to the castle. It seemed that the Thestrals had sensed something wrong about him. There was a chill about them, something he could almost taste as they stared at him. He caught the smell of rotting flesh as he watched, but was broken from his reverie by Ron and Hermione. He boarded the carriage and tried not to think about the Thestrals as he watched Ron and Hermione debate about what Voldemort would do next.

They entered the Great Hall to a relatively subdued atmosphere. Harry looked at the teachers table and almost growled in anger to see Umbridge sitting next to Flitwick, wearing a repulsive yellow cardigan and looking ruffled. Dumbledore looked cheerful but something about him seemed... cold, likely in response to Umbridge and the day's events. Harry scanned the other tables, picking out faces he hadn't seen in years. Cho Chang, Dean Thomas, Colin Creevey. He noted with distaste that Malfoy looked very pleased with himself. Harry decided to keep an eye on Malfoy; the pale boy could have easily known about the attack today.

"Who do you think the new teacher is, Harry?" asked Seamus Finnigan from across the empty table.

"She works at the Ministry, I think," Harry replied bitterly, not taking his eyes off of the fat woman's smirking face. He hadn't seen Umbridge after she left the school in his fifth year, but he had laughed when he heard of her death when the Ministry had fallen. He had vowed not to cross her this time, but try to bring Voldemort into the open so she would be removed.

His dark thoughts were interrupted by the door at the back of the hall opening and McGonagall leading the frightened first-years in. She set up the Sorting Hat, allowed it to sing its song (identical to the one Harry remembered from his third year) and sorted the students. Harry slowly became bored as he saw the same tiny students as he vaguely remembered going to the same houses. He tried to work out what Voldemort hoped to gain from the attack that morning, other than fear and confusion. He concluded that the attack had been mainly opportunistic, and would have actually succeeded had Harry himself not intervened, so actually it made a lot of sense. Voldemort would likely now focus his attention on killing the Phoenix, however.

Finally the sorting ended (much to the joy of Ron, who looked forward to food), but Dumbledore first got to his feet to deliver a speech.

“Good evening and welcome, or welcome back as the case may be. I would just like to take a moment to congratulate you all on your excellent conduct today when the Hogwarts Express was attacked by Lord V-“

“Hem hem,” Umbridge coughed, and Harry groaned, tired of the charade he had to continue with. He had bigger fish to fry than this woman, and had a burning impatience that made him almost shiver with anger when he contemplated how much time these people were wasting with regard to Voldemort. He hadn’t even met the man face-to-face since he had summoned the demon; he could be up against something he wasn’t prepared for.

“Headmaster, I feel that your information regarding the unfortunate attack on the Hogwarts Express is inaccurate. It was not the work of... You-Know-Who, but of a copy-cat group, as the Minister has already said. The people involved are being traced as we speak, as is their leader, the Phoenix.”

Several gasps and whispers erupted from the House tables as people swapped stories about what they had seen on the train.

“Professor Umbridge, as I was about to say, the individual known as the Phoenix apparently helped the Head Girl and several Prefects to evacuate the train, no doubt preventing several casualties. I feel your information on this matter is inaccurate in this case, but I trust the Ministry will investigate the matter thoroughly.”

Umbridge gaped, and opened her mouth to reply, before Dumbledore stonewalled her and continued with his speech. He announced that no one had been seriously hurt in the attack and that anyone wishing to talk about it was free to approach their Head of House. Harry snorted at that, picturing someone trying to talk to Snape. Food then appeared on the table, much to Harry’s relief. He dug in appreciatively, his mind on the attack that morning.

There was something that worried him about it; they had had no intelligence beforehand. Snape was obviously kept in the dark, which meant Voldemort might know about him. Either that, or Voldemort was keeping his information close to his chest this time round. Harry would have to talk to Dumbledore about that. The Voldemort Harry had fought wasn't as cautious; then again, he hadn't had to be.

He was finishing his mashed potatoes when he felt a pain in his knees, which he attributed to the fighting earlier that day. The Cruciatus from Alecto Carrow was still lingering in the back of his mind and causing his joints to throb with pain when he moved, but his legs were hurting independently of that. It was a sort of numb buzzing, like receiving an electric shock. He was irritated by it through the dinner conversation, which was largely people retelling the train battle from different perspectives, which Harry kept out of. He was feeling drained, despite the potion Pomfrey had given him, and was beginning to lose track of his surroundings, his vision blurring like a camera in soft focus.

Once the food vanished and Dumbledore gave the usual after-dinner notices (stay out of the Forest, Filch had updated his banned list, similar to what Harry remembered), the congregation was dismissed without further incident, if you didn't count Umbridge glowering darkly from where she sat. Harry, still being bothered by the leg pains, slowly filed out of the hall with Ron and Hermione, noticing that Umbridge was having what looked like a heated (from her side) conversation with Dumbledore amidst the ruckus of everyone leaving. He made a note to talk to Dumbledore about that as well. The Headmaster hadn't mentioned Voldemort after the dinner, which meant he had sensed it would be less than wise in the current climate; Harry couldn't blame him with Umbridge sitting so near. Things were beginning to escalate, and Harry needed to help the Order keep a handle on things. The Ministry needed to be dealt with, the wand of Gryffindor Horcrux needed to be located and Death Eaters needed to be dealt with. Harry was also considering infiltrating Azkaban and killing the Death Eaters currently incarcerated there; it would make his job easier in the long run if lieutenants like the Lestranges were killed while they were weak. His brain had begun to fog by this point, so he decided to just get to the common room before he did anything else.

He walked to the common room in a haze, not taking in where he was walking or the various greetings he got. The leg pain was beginning to irritate and concern him; it had spread from his joints where the Cruciatus pains still lingered to his thighs, and he had to concentrate to support his weight. A low humming had also started up in his ears to go with the blurred vision, which Harry attributed to magic exhaustion. Deciding a good night's sleep was needed, he mumbled his excuses, stumbled up the dormitory steps into the deserted third-years dormitory and got into his four poster still fully dressed. The humming in his ears began to increase as he had climbed the stairs, and lethargy had gripped his limbs. Harry had tried to concentrate and work out what was happening to him, but he couldn't contemplate anything other than getting into bed.

Once he was safely in his four-poster, the noise in his ears turned into a keening whine and Harry yelled in pain before everything went black.

Chapter 13 – Evolution of the planning process

Harry was in pain.

He had been in pain before, some worse than what he was feeling right now, but never in so many places. His legs were being stretched and ripped, the ligaments feeling like they were snapping like dry rope and the tendons being stretched beyond their elasticity by forces unknown. He couldn't see a thing but his eyes felt like they were being squeezed and crushed, surely to the point of rupturing like grapes. The rest of him was simply on fire, causing him to thrash and spasm in the vain hope of throwing off the agony.

But the pain would not stop.

He tried to open his eyes, to see something tangible other than utter blackness or to feel something with his hands other than empty space, but he couldn't. Finally the pain began to intensify, and Harry realised he had been screaming the entire time, the scream of a man who knew he had nothing left to face but the pain he was feeling in the crushing darkness.

Finally he saw something. Static discharge of all different hues, like multicoloured ball lightning, played across his vision. He could hear the crackle of electricity over his cries of agony and smell the sharp stench of ozone and almonds.

The lightning shot across his sight and then became brighter. Unbearably bright, like fireworks up close.

He saw the face of Albus Dumbledore staring down at him.

The pain stopped, to be replaced with darkness which was blessedly cool.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Albus Dumbledore sat in his circular office behind his antique desk, looking seriously at a curious stone bowl in front of him. It was carved

with a number of ancient runes and Latin scripture, and appeared to be filled with strangely thick silver mist. The Headmaster had not changed his clothes or moved since he had arrived in his office from the feast, he had simply been thinking.

"Fawkes, I am unsure of what to do," he said heavily, sitting back in his chair. A beautiful bird perched on the back of the comfortable seat, looking as sombre as the Headmaster. The phoenix trilled pensively and bobbed its head, causing Dumbledore to nod gravely. "I don't want to exploit him, old friend. He is from a time where the strongest of us could break and go mad, which makes him more powerful than most of the Order. Before today I saw no sign of danger in him, but after the business on the Express..."

Fawkes alighted from his perch on the seat onto the desk, next to the Pensieve. Dumbledore stroked him gently, his face worn and tired. "He killed them, Fawkes. He killed over five Death Eaters without hesitation. I do not deny at the time it was necessary, but he murdered those men without a second thought. That frightens me, old friend. What has that boy become? And should I feel guilty when I think of how useful he could be in combating Voldemort? I consider him to be more of a weapon than a person at times..."

Fawkes just blinked and rubbed his head against Dumbledore's gnarled hand affectionately, causing the Headmaster to smile wearily and move his Pensieve to one side.

"I feel the land of sleep calling me, friend. I shall contemplate this more in the morning." He rose from his chair and began to organise various different coloured papers that littered his polished desk for the morning, casting delicate privacy wards over some of the more sensitive documents. As he finished and began to move into his private chambers, a beautiful silver tabby cat glided through the wall in front of him. It had a very stern demeanour about it, and landed noiselessly on Dumbledore's desk. He motioned with his hand, and the cat opened its mouth.

"Headmaster, come immediately to the Hospital Wing. Potter is having some sort of seizure and we need your advice," said the harried voice of Minerva McGonagall from the cat's mouth.

Dumbledore waved his hand again and the Patronus dispersed into nothingness. Nodding at Fawkes he swept out of his office at a brisk pace, heading for the Hospital Wing. He met no one on the way, it being nearly midnight, and arrived quickly with some help from the castle organising staircases efficiently for him. His face did not change apart from a slight tightening of his mouth, giving him a determined air. When he strode down the hallway towards the Hospital Wing he heard voices from within, curiously muted, as though there was a silencing ward on the Wing.

“Poppy, he’s still screaming, can’t you sedate him?”

“I have no idea what might be causing the pain, he seems fine apart from the spasms! Where is the Headmaster?”

Albus threw open the Hospital Wing doors with a flourish, to be greeted with the sight of Harry, mouth open in what was clearly debilitating pain, thrashing around on a bed across from the doors while McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey attempted to restrain him with spells, none of which seemed to be working. His body was suffused with a scarlet glow, and Dumbledore could smell ozone. Frowning, he withdrew his wand with a flourish and cast a stunning spell at Harry, only to find it hit the boy’s body and vanished.

“We’ve tried that, Headmaster, we only managed to Silence him, and that took both of us!” said Madam Pomfrey, wincing in pain as Harry’s arm smacked her in the stomach seemingly of its own accord. Dumbledore rolled up his sleeves and walked over to the bed, still frowning.

“Stand back, please,” he said quietly, pointing his wand at Harry’s forehead. The boy was moving faster now, his body now clearly emitting scarlet light under his skin, his scar standing out amongst the deep red. Dumbledore could hear a faint screaming, a sign of the silencing charm wearing off, and knew he had to act fast. He closed his eyes and muttered a short string of words, almost like a chant, and finished the spell by jabbing his wand smartly forward to touch Harry’s forehead.

The spell had a dramatic effect. The silencing spell broke, causing Harry's yells of anguish to start up again, and the red light emanating from his body intensified to a point where his body could be barely seen. Albus shielded his eyes and shouted for his companions to back away, which they did as a roaring noise filled the Hospital Wing, giving the impression of the apocalypse crashing down upon the school.

And then it stopped just as soon as it had started. The red light vanished, Harry stopped screaming and the roaring noise abated. Dumbledore leaned, worried, over Harry, who now looked peaceful. He cracked open one eye and then another, looked at the Headmaster, and then passed out with a sigh.

"Headmaster?" Madam Pomfrey asked from somewhere behind him, "Headmaster, what on earth just happened? And why does Potter look as though he's aged four years?"

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

"Obliviate!"

"Headmaster! What are you doing?"

"Be quiet, Minerva, it is my deepest regret that Poppy cannot remember this incident. I can only be thankful that you cast silencing charms on the room before that magical backlash occurred."

Harry's mouth was dry and his head was pounding with his heartbeat, like a deep drum which boomed in his ears. His eyes stung, even though they weren't open, and his entire face was itchy. He groaned from a parched throat and felt a wave of nausea overtake him, barely managing to roll over before he vomited over the side of the hospital bed. The voices above him stopped abruptly and he heard a deep voice vanish the mess before firm hands pushed him back onto the bed.

"Minerva, move Poppy into her office, stun her, and wait in there. That is an order I'm afraid. Harry, can you hear me?"

Harry moaned weakly in response. “Wa...wat...”

“Aguamenti” the deep voice intoned, and Harry felt the blessed cool touch of water against his tongue, and gulped it down eagerly. He felt the booming pulse of blood in his hearing recede after the voice – Dumbledore, it had to be – murmured another spell, and the stinging pain in his eyes vanished all together.

“Harry, I’m going to ask you to open your eyes. Something has happened, which I had not foreseen.”

Harry drew in a breath at the hint of concern in Dumbledore’s voice, and opened his eyes slowly, wincing at the lights of the Hospital Wing, even though the torches were dimmed. He blinked as he saw Dumbledore above him, as he had before when he had been having what he thought was a seizure.

“What happened, Headmaster?” he asked wearily, not moving his head or arms, fearing the worst. His voice sounded loud in his ears, but he attributed it to his condition.

“I can only make an educated guess, Harry, but I feel you must first know that your body is rejecting the amount of stress you are putting it under, both magically and physically. Physical strain we can heal in an instant, but something has effected your body magically, something which isn’t just plain magical exhaustion. Harry, you said you were picking up some ‘artefacts’. What exactly did you purchase?”

Harry closed his eyes with an internal groan. The rings he had bought were definitely not legal, and Dumbledore would not approve of him using them, although Harry reasoned that Dumbledore could shed some light on how to use them better, seeing as he had been hurt by them during the train battle. At the time he had needed an edge, any edge, and had been feeling paranoid at how weak he was compared to how he had been. At that point he didn’t feel up to even moving his head, so simply said they were on his fingers, and Dumbledore tapped his hands in turn delicately with his wand.

“Oh Harry... what have you done?”

“They aren’t that dangerous –“

“Harry, I feel you haven’t grasped what has exactly happened to you...” Dumbledore said softly, before transfiguring an empty vase on the cabinet beside the hospital bed into a long mirror and holding it above Harry’s head so he could see his entire body.

“Shit.”

“Indeed.”

Harry could only observe in a sort of detached shock – a disinterested point of examination as the situation had yet to sink in. He looked nearly eighteen years old. He had aged. Stubble lined his cheeks and chin, and his hair was shaggier than he remembered. His voice sounding loud also made sense now, it had broken artificially. You only needed to add scars to get a rough approximation of how he had looked in the future he had come from. His situation had gone from confusing but manageable, to completely screwed.

“So, Harry, tell me again. Are those artefacts, by any chance, performance enhancing rings of a questionable nature, which you used without first consulting me and used them for longer than you were supposed to?”

“They... they may have been, Headmaster,” he replied in a dull voice, the severity of his predicament still failing to impact on him in any real way.

“So Harry, you used these powerful and dangerous items irresponsibly and in conjunction with some high level magic, including the Killing Curse, the use of which I need to discuss with you separately, and expected your underage and underdeveloped body to be able to handle the strain with no ill effects? What is wrong with you? You claim to be able to handle yourself and as a result I feel I shouldn’t have to lecture you on issues such as this!”

“Shit.”

“Indeed. The magic you used, as well as the constant ill effects of using the rings, would have killed you had I not released it with the hope that the result wouldn’t be your death. Anything could have happened to you, I’m almost pleased it was simply you aging to compensate for the stress.”

“‘Simply’ me aging? Headmaster, I’ve only been back at school one day and I’ve fought off multiple death eaters, saved the Express and now I’ve aged several years! People are already noticing I’m acting ‘oddly’, what do you think they’ll say next?”

“Harry, if there is one thing I have learned since you travelled in time and turned my world on its axis, it’s to be ready to adapt on the fly. I will circulate that you had an adverse reaction to some skele-gro needed to grow a portion of your skull after the Express accident. I daresay it would cause your pituitary gland to go haywire where it to touch it if we were so inclined to experiment. And if I were you I would cease with the self-pity, it is entirely your fault as an apparently responsible adult that you caused this problem, and you should be looking at the advantages of this. You no longer have the physical disadvantages of being underage, for example.”

The explanation largely went over Harry’s head, but he was reassured that Dumbledore had a plan and had to agree with his spiel about the advantages... heck, he didn’t even need the rings now that he could properly train his body. And, he reminded himself, this was Magical Britain, where giant killer snakes were hatched from toads and you could be cursed to vomit slugs. Forced growth was probably not as unusual as he thought. He forced down the panic that had threatened to overwhelm him and began to think critically; he needed to keep on top of things to have a hope of fighting Voldemort.

“I’ll... I’ll need to spin this as something I’m not too keen on, so as not to arouse suspicion. I reckon Fudge will probably be here once Umbridge gets wind of it. I think you need to run interference on her, forge some medical notes or some such and modify Madam Pomfrey’s memory to make her think what you said happened if she is given truth serum.”

“Harry, I doubt the Ministry will administer truth serum simply to verify a medical case!”

“Headmaster, Umbridge sent Dementors after me in my fifth year in an attempt to discredit me, regardless of what the outcome of the attack was. I feel she isn’t above some interrogation. Don’t try to stop her if she does it, we need to keep out of the Ministry’s way until Voldemort makes a bolder move which they can’t shove under the carpet.”

“I am forced to agree Harry, loathe as I am to want Tom to commit an atrocity which cannot be ignored. Incidentally, I have scheduled the first Hogsmeade weekend a week on Saturday, in around ten day’s time.”

“Headmaster, you cannot be serious,” Harry said gravely, propping himself up on his elbows into a sitting position and clearing his throat, “Hogsmeade is simply asking for trouble.”

“Harry, I cannot stop the weekends for no real reason, the Ministry would have my position, and Umbridge would be left in control of the school. It would be seen as an unnecessary act of defiance and control and used to get me on trumped-up charges. I’ve scheduled the weekend much earlier than I usually would as it is, and I say this with my deepest regret, a target for Voldemort to attack. I will be stationing heavy Order presence in the town and hope Tom will be rash enough to attempt a raid, and then we will subdue it as quickly as we can – I will personally aim to protect my students in that case. And, of course, we will have you to assist us. We need to get this war into the open so we can fight it.”

“I wholeheartedly think that is an incredible risky plan, Headmaster, but I’ll do my best.” He stroked his chin ruefully and sighed, “And I’ll just have to endure the stares for now, and at least I’m bigger than they are.”

“I daresay you’ll have to ‘learn’ shaving charms, Harry,” Dumbledore remarked with a smile, his eyes twinkling.

“Amusing, sir. What did you actually do to me to cause this?”

Dumbledore stood up from where he had perched on the end of the bed, smoothing out his extravagant robes, “I used a charm to release the built up magic in your body, which was causing the most interesting red light. You could have died, exploded, grown an extra arm or had any one of a myriad of interesting things happen to you. The magic seems to have kept the result simple and made your body able to accommodate it better in future.”

“Exploded? Sir, you aren’t serious are you?”

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes creasing with laughter lines. “My dear boy, all I can say is that Mr. Filch would have been most displeased having to clean up had it gone wrong,” he said jovially before calling for a tense-looking Professor McGonagall to come out of the Matron’s office and leaving the Hospital wing in quiet conversation with her. Harry was left alone.

“Bugger,” he muttered into the now-darkness before lying back on his pillows.

Tomorrow was guaranteed to be interesting for all parties involved.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Dolores Umbridge couldn’t believe what she was hearing. The Headmaster had finally snapped.

“... so you see Dolores, Mr. Potter has suffered quite severe magical trauma as a result of the potion affecting his hormones. The aging effect looks quite... dramatic, but it is cosmetic and should have no impact on his schoolwork or learning in these hallowed halls, you can assure the Minister of that. Considering Mr. Potter’s celebrity status, I have barred the media access to the school grounds for the time being. I’m sure Cornelius will have no further queries, this situation is quite straightforward. I will be informing the Governors presently.”
Dumbledore sat back in his office chair, his fingers pressed together to form a steeple and a wry smile on his face. The smile infuriated

Umbridge. She knew the old man was a fool, a fool who didn't realise the damage he was doing to the Ministry's stability in these troubled times.

Cornelius would flush out that new terrorist group that had surfaced, she was sure of it. Dumbledore would be shown the folly of his arrogance and be cast out like a leper from Hogwarts. Only then could the children be taught the proper ways, the correct ways, of learning...

“Are you quite all right Dolores?” Dumbledore said mildly, rising from his chair and shifting papers around his desk.

Umbridge noticed she had begun to grip the leather armrests of the chair she was in quite tightly, and relaxed. “Certainly, Headmaster,” she simpered, “I look forward to seeing Potter in my classes and rest assured I will not treat him any differently. I also heard that you have scheduled a Hogsmeade weekend soon, are you quite sure this is wise?”

“Dolores I feel we need to get out and about and in the fresh air in these troubled times, to wash away our worries. And, as you have so thoroughly assured me, the Ministry won’t let anything happen to my students, I’m sure. Well, I’m sure you have classes to teach and I’m taking up your valuable time. I will see you at lunchtime, and Mr. Potter will return to classes later this week. Have a good day, Dolores!”

Umbridge nodded, a forced smile on her pudgy face, and waddled from the room, mentally wishing Dumbledore a painful death. Something was afoot; she just had to find out what. Cornelius trusted Lucius Malfoy, he might know something. She thought for a moment as she went down the rotating staircase and past the gargoyle, and then decided to pen a letter to Mr. Malfoy. He might be helpful in advising her on her next course of action.

[illegible]

“Lay down your wand, Potter. This is the end.” Voldemort spat angrily, blood trickling from a shallow cut in his bald pale brow. His robes, once fine and expensive, were torn and in tatters, stained with blood of dubious origin.

“Come and get it, Tom,” Harry growled, gripping his holly wand even tighter in his hand. He knelt, breathing heavily and clad in a black outfit, in the dust and debris of the battlefield, the blackened patch of ground that was all that remained of Hogsmeade. The sky above was an unhealthy purple, as though the clouds themselves were bruised and beaten. Lightning forked down at intermittent intervals. You could barely see through the thick darkness surrounding the combatants; they might as well have been fighting indoors in a dirt-floored arena.

“This is it boy, you have nowhere to run!”

“If I had nowhere to run, would I do this?” Harry said wryly, before screaming an incantation to cause bright light to burst from his wand in a dazzling shock of white. Voldemort raised a thin arm to his eyes, cursing his enemy, but Harry had already started to sprint as fast as he could away from the Dark Lord. After a short distance he felt a tingle as he passed the short-term wards Voldemort had thrown up as the duel commenced and he activated his Port-key to safety, the Dark Lord’s howls of rage in his ears as he spun away.

Harry’s green eyes snapped open.

Only a dream.

He had run that time. He’d run nearly every time. He’d been ambushed fishing for the location of the cup Horcrux under polyjuice; he learned only after that it had been hidden by Wormtail in Godric’s Hollow. After a brief intense duel with the Dark Lord, he’d fled.

Never strong enough.

A cursory examination of his surroundings placed him in the Hospital Wing, in what looked like late afternoon (Dumbledore’s spell had taken it out of him, in retrospect), with no one else in sight. His wand stood on the bedside table, along with a silver pitcher of water and a

small note. Harry reached over, starting at the sight of his adult arms after so long, and unfolded the note.

Dear Harry, it read, I have informed Umbridge of your condition. She was displeased from what I could tell, but hasn't let it show. The school has also been informed and so, unfortunately, that will mean the Dark Lord also knows through students such as master Malfoy. I trust you can adjust to this. The Order is preparing for the Hogsmeade weekend, as I hope you will. The masses still do not know your identity.

I have also confirmed the destruction of the prophecy copy in the Hall of Prophecies in the Department of Mysteries; I took the liberty of eliminating it myself and as of yet the Ministry has neglected to make a replacement. Tom will likely discover this eventually, but I was sure it would be beneficial for you to know.

A.D.

As soon as he finished reading the last word the letter burst into flame; evidently Dumbledore had been fiddling with charms on his covert notes. Things were moving along as well as could be expected given the present situation; Harry couldn't break his cover as it kept Voldemort consistent to what he had experienced and Voldemort was pretty much playing into the Order's hands. Harry looked again at the table and smiled, seeing a slight distortion in the shape of a smooth, round pebble. The stone he had enchanted to hold his costume, disillusioned by Dumbledore.

He checked for Madam Pomfrey and quickly got changed into the robes laid out at the end of his bed; he noted that they were for a young man rather than the 13 year old he had been before, and he grabbed his wand to conjure up a small hand mirror. He had a slight darkening around his upper lip and cheeks – evidence that shaving would be required from now on, as well as hair that was more out of control than he remembered. Still checking he was alone; Harry rearranged his school robes and set about making himself look presentable.

Ten minutes later and he was clean shaven, clean and had his hair cropped short at the sides and back, with some more length on the top. Judging by the sun shining brightly outside the infirmary windows it was getting later in the day, so lessons were almost over. Harry quietly got up from his bed, gathered his paraphernalia such as his wand and phoenix stone, and stole out of the Hospital Wing into the carpeted corridor beyond. It was deserted. He hurried, barefoot (lamentably the House Elves had failed to provide footwear), heading for the Gryffindor common room. He reached it, only passing Nearly Headless Nick on the way, who wished Harry good luck with his new appearance and complimented his look.

Harry was unsure how reassured he was that a male ghost with a barely attached head thought he looked “dashing”.

Entering the common room Harry was on edge, paranoid that the sixth years would have a study period or he had misjudged the time and it would be full; thankfully he was given a clear run to the dorm steps, which he dashed up and into the 3rd year dormitories. As he shut the door the bell signalling the end of classes went, so Harry busied himself with putting on shoes and making sure he looked prepared and relaxed for the questions that were bound to come; he was looking to just deflect the majority of them and then plan a quiet time to visit the Room of Requirement to see what had changed in his new body later on in the week. Large scale confrontation was best to be avoided. It wasn't the students who worried him personally; it was Umbridge and the potential trouble she could cause him depending on how nosey she was. Harry could deal with Aurors or Dementors (although Dementors were not his favourite of magical creatures) but he would prefer to have the law on his side for as long as he could.

He noted his clothes had been carefully replaced with larger sizes – Dumbledore's work no doubt. He also realised adjustments to the Phoenix stone's enchantments would be needed now, especially regarding the leg transfigurations and the sizing of the costume.

After several minutes of lying in his four-poster and thinking, the door to the dormitory opened to admit Ron and Hermione, with Neville poking his head round the corner and retreating as soon as he saw

Harry. Ron and Hermione, young caricatures of the pair Harry had known, gaped like fish.

“Harry, whoa...” said Ron blankly, his voice now irritatingly pitched.

“Oh my goodness Harry, are you alright? Dumbledore said-“

“I know what Dumbledore said, Hermione,” said Harry softly without moving from his relaxed position on the bed, “I’m alright. I’ve just aged, there’s no side effects and everything other than my body is the same. Just treat it like I’ve got some disfiguring disease and act like nothing’s happened.”

“Harry, mate, you’re much taller than us now,” Ron pointed out. Harry sighed.

“I know Ron; just try to let it go. I have.”

“We’ll... we’ll tell everyone not to disturb you, Harry, or do you want us to tell them to just ignore it?” Hermione said tentatively, her eyes lingering on Harry’s chest and face, which were both strikingly different from before.

“Please, Hermione, that would be great,” Harry said, grateful one of his friends had a useful head on her shoulders. The pair of them were becoming more of a hindrance than a welcome reminder of the past, with the initial nostalgia quickly fading into the nihilistic knowledge that they weren’t the best friends Harry had fought side by side with and were just vaguely irritating copies.

Sometimes it was hard for the last man standing to not be misanthropic, even if Harry had been given a second lifeline to fix things.

“Umbridge was asking after you,” Hermione ventured as the pair of them made to leave. “She said she wanted to invite you for coffee after the Hogsmeade weekend, and expected you to catch up on the work you’re going to miss this week. Oh and Ginny says she hopes you feel better.”

Harry nodded and smiled, waving them farewell. As soon as they were gone he drew the curtains around his bed shut, charmed them to give himself some privacy and set to work fixing the enchantments on his costume, little flashes of coloured spell fire illuminating the darkened enclosure of his four-poster. Umbridge would just have to be stonewalled effectively until the Hogsmeade weekend. Harry felt things would come to a head there one way or another.

Percy Weasley, Umbridge, Fudge, Voldemort, the Malfoy's the Order, the Phoenix, Rita Skeeter's slander and making sure the war was won... Harry had a lot to consider. And that was only the things he had a handle on and knew fully about.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

"Are you sure of this, Lucius?" Voldemort muttered, scanning the distasteful pastel coloured stationary before him at arm's length. One of his trusted lieutenants, Malfoy, had been contacted by a Ministerial Undersecretary called Umbridge with some interesting information which had yet to be made public. Malfoy's own son had reportedly written in to confirm what Umbridge said.

Potter had aged. And there was to be a Hogsmeade weekend very shortly. Both bits of information were very useful to the Dark Lord. Potter's magical misfortune was not unheard of and meant he would be easier to capture, being cripplingly unused to his age advancement magically and physically until a good few months of practice, not that Voldemort expected much of a fight from a thirteen year old. In addition, the Hogsmeade weekend provided Voldemort the perfect opportunity to make an appearance with his new body and break the enemy morale before they knew what was happening. Things had taken an advantageous turn.

The Dark Lord glared out from under his sleek hair at Malfoy, who was kneeling and looking at the ground in fear. "Well?"

"Absolutely sure my Lord. As I have said my own son confirmed it and the Umbridge woman has no reason to lie." Lucius barely kept

the tremor out of his voice as he knelt before one of the most powerful men on the planet.

“Your information is very useful to me Lucius. Leave and tell my Death Eaters to begin preparing for an attack on the Saturday of this Hogsmeade weekend. I want them to be equipped with potions and spare wands as much as possible; use our decoy Gringott’s vault or simply rob Ollivander’s and the Apothecary. Snape should be able to aid you with this. See that it is done.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Lucius rose and strode quickly from the room, his long blonde hair hanging almost limp and dull in fear while his clothes seemed to lack lustre in the draining presence of Voldemort.

Voldemort himself sat in the same living room he had stationed himself in before, holding Umbridge’s disgustingly scented letter while surrounded by ignored decadence. He would kill Potter, and he would kill the old man. And he would do it on the Hogsmeade weekend. The old man’s Order was useless compared to the numbers and ruthlessness of the Death Eaters. And as for the Phoenix, that man who seemed to be bent on thwarting Voldemort’s plans...

He doubted that the masked enigma would survive more than a handful of spells in a duel with the Dark Lord Voldemort.

One way or another, that Saturday would bring events spinning into motion.

Chapter 14 – Convergence point

The day after Harry's return to the common room was, blessedly, a Saturday, meaning for all intents and purposes he stayed in his dormitory. His dorm mates had asked much the same questions as Ron and Hermione, but he had brushed them off in a similar way and gave off the general air of not wanting to talk about it, which they understood. No-one commented on him apparently not leaving his room on the Saturday. After all, they would want to prolong the stares for as long as possible in his situation.

In reality, however, the drawn curtains round Harry's four-poster concealed nothing. He was heading for the Room of Requirement in his invisibility cloak to experiment, having fobbed off Ron with excuses that he would go to the kitchen to have his breakfast. He had done some spell practise since time travelling but hadn't been able to exercise his full repertoire on the quiet due to the Weasleys keeping an eye on him, especially after the news of Voldemort's return. Grimmauld Place was also not available for his use until Dumbledore deemed it necessary due to Pettigrew (under memory charms after his meetings with the Minister and Harry revealing him) being held there under guard.

Harry stole down the grand carpeted hallways of the castle past unlit torch brackets and milling random groups of students of all ages, dressed in an enlarged black practical outfit underneath his cloak, which was now tight for space after Harry had grown taller. Eventually he reached the blank space of wall where the door formed and paced back and forth, thinking hard.

I want a place with something to practice on.

After three quick passes the nondescript door materialised out of the corner of his eye, allowing Harry to slip into the room. The Room had answered admirably; Harry was standing in a large room made of bare flecked concrete and lit by strip lighting at the top (why strip lighting Harry didn't know, possibly for aesthetics). It seemed to expand when Harry thought it should be bigger, settling at a comfortable size reminiscent of a small gym hall. Lined up against the stark grey wall opposite were a number of what looked like shop

dummies clutching various assorted weapons; Harry could see a mace, flail, sword and a few scattered wands.

Show me how this works, he thought, and one of the wand wielding dummies moved along with a sword wielding dummy. Harry was impressed at their fluidity, aided by magical joints; it was identical to human movement except the human in question was featureless, androgynous and beige. The wizard mannequin fired a yet of red light at the sword dummy, and a loud buzzer sounded from nowhere to indicate the hit. The sword dummy then swung at the other dummy and another buzzer sounded on contact, however the sword was blunt and merely bounced off the curved chest of the target.

Harry understood the mechanics of the training aid, and approved of the Room's ingenuity. He asked for a box to store his Cloak in and placed it in the small chest that appeared by the door before whispering the activation word for his Phoenix stone, transforming into his costumed self. His stylised cloak dropped to the floor with a whisper and his charmed bandana covered his mouth while not restricting his air flow. Turning towards the mannequins, he was startled to see several already advancing on him, various weapons raised. Harry simply raised a hand and took a deep breath, pointing his fingers at the dummies.

"Let's go. Freccia!" he shouted, sending five blazing arrows of light through the heads of the nearest dummies from his fingers and causing them to fade from existence as he 'killed' them. The arrows faded as quickly as they came, revealing more dummies slowly walking through the back wall of the room, as though it was a waterfall rather than seemingly solid stone.

Harry began to run at the first half-dozen dummies who were running towards him, leaping into them with a howl and knocking the first one down on the floor with a crash and causing him to fade out. Once he was surrounded by mannequins he slammed his palms into the ground, muttering a concussion spell which threw the dummies off balance as the concrete rippled like water from where his palms touched the floor. He then jumped to his feet out and started shouting blasting and repelling curses, sending dozens of the humanoid figurines flying through the air as he started throwing blasting-curse

aided punches into their chests and abdomens. Once his training enemies recovered and began to bring wands and weapons to bear Harry jumped and somersaulted out of the group surrounding him, aided by a whispered levitation spell. His cloak flapped in the wind from his jump, knocking his hood back and causing dancing flames to appear in Harry's vision

"Cultavio!" he hissed, slicing his hand through the air like a karate attack, sending a distorted wave of air into the faceless opponents. Initially nothing happened, and then several of them began to fall in half slowly before fading out to be replaced by new ones. "Effodio!" Harry spat, flicking his fingers at the nearest dummy and causing a galleon-sized hole to explode into its chest, fading it out.

Finally the spell-using dummies began to counterattack while their melee brethren chased Harry around the room, unable to catch up to him with his magically assisted jumps and rolls. Red lights flashed around his head, batted away or caught and banished with his hands while he totally eschewed the use of a wand. Finally several sword wielding dummies caught up to him, only to have their blades ducked and several effodio curses slam into their chests and limbs from Harry's nimble fingers.

Slowly he began to tire, the repeated punches and kicks from his booted feet and gloves hands taking their toll while his hands began to warm up considerably from the volume of magic he was pushing through them. He glanced up at the ceiling, thinking hard, and was rewarded with a kill counter displaying several dozen mannequins downed with no hits received and a constant 15 enemies in the room at all times. The red lights were becoming more persistent now, with Harry throwing up weak Protego shields around his chest and back to deflect them into other mannequins, causing them to fade out.

With his wand withdrawn, Harry began to make complex movements from left to right, slowly backing up from the advancing dummies. Finally he finished his spell and blue crystalline darts began to spray from his wand at an alarming rate, stitching turquoise explosions across the bodies of the front line of dummies and causing the most severely hit to be completely dismembered. Harry followed up with a flamethrower-like spell to incinerate a number of the remainders in an

oily pungent roiling tongue of flame, totally unlike the crisp clean burn of fiendfyre but without the added danger of evil sentient fire. Red spells still spattered on the surface of his grey shielding with little effect other than little starbursts of colour, the dummies seemingly unable to score a hit.

Once the fire spell died down Harry noticed no more dummies emerged from the wall. He looked at the ceiling and saw that he had eliminated 50 of them in a short order, which was pretty simple seeing as they only had basic attack patterns. While he pondered this the back wall where they spawned from rippled and then began to release black mannequins, this time armed with a pair of wands and walking much faster than the ones before. With no warning the first one out of the wall raised his wands and began to fire off red bursts at a quick pace, sending Harry diving to one side as a steady line of spells hit where he had been standing before. Before long more black mannequins had entered the room and Harry found himself under a silent barrage of red light as he hid behind his scarlet shielding, pondering his next move. This time there were only ten of the enemies, supposedly to compensate for their increased firepower.

Before long Harry flooded his shield with power, causing it to expand violently and stagger the black dummies, giving Harry an opening to retaliate with a quick barrage of cultivio cutting waves and shocking spells, lighting arcing between his wand and the dummies, fading them out in short order. After decimating a second 10-man wave with a series of wandless effodio spells, Harry called an end to the session, with 70 “kills” on the clock and a sweat on his brow. After a short rest in a nice chair conjured by the Room and a series of cleaning charms, Harry stood refreshed in his Phoenix outfit, satisfied with the results of the session. His agility and strength were back to a level that meant he didn’t have to compensate for them, although his stamina was a little weak magically.

He spent a short while testing different spells on bull’s-eye targets in the Room, from bone-breaker curses to inversion hexes. He was pleased with the results, having shown little to no deterioration in his repertoire from the time he had spent relatively idle. He felt he could use some of the more dangerous spells and rituals he knew, such as banishing Inferi and fiendfyre, safely as well as maintaining his

prodigious wandless magic abilities. If Voldemort or his Death Eaters attacked on the Hogsmeade weekend, which Harry was thinking to be likely, then he would be able to combat them until help arrived or they retreated.

Voldemort himself was simply an unknown quantity, after his demonically aided rebirth. He looked different, he seemed to act different, and he could indeed fight differently. Harry looked ahead to that confrontation with no small amount of trepidation.

Now all he needed was for the Prophet not to totally misrepresent things in the event there was a fight. Then again it wasn't like he had his hopes up there.

[illegible]

“Good lord he’s the size of a seventh year!”

“Wow... we can date him now can't we? I mean he's technically old enough...”

"I wonder who he's taking to Hogsmeade?"

“He must look a sight in his classes, being that big!”

Harry strode past the clustered groups of fellow students, dimly aware of their gossip as he made his way to his first lesson of the week, Defence Against the Dark Arts. Sunday had been spent as Saturday had, in his room, getting food from the kitchens or in the Room of Requirement. Hermione had dropped in to see him along with Ron, and they had reassured him they would stick with him come Monday. He appreciated it, but he had faced worse gossip when he had done his Third Year first time around. They didn't like Umbridge already, as all she had done was make them read during their lesson, but no one had complained unlike Harry's previous first lesson with her.

He had also received a letter from Sirius and Lupin, Sirius mainly making jokes about how he was getting ahead of himself on the

dating scene and Lupin commenting on how it would help him when the storm broke and Voldemort revealed himself. Both of them were working on locating Voldemort's wand Horcrux, but it was apparently proving frustratingly difficult.

Lamentably he would have to spend his first lesson with Umbridge, and then he would be seeing Professor Kettleburn for his Magical Creatures lesson; Hagrid was aiding the Order with sending envoys to the Giants to keep them neutral, which was working admirably, so Kettleburn had stayed on this year unlike the last time Harry had had his Third Year.

He met up with the rest of his year at the entrance to Umbridge's classroom; they gave him askance glances or nods of recognition, and he simply smiled half-heartedly down at them in return. Only Seamus was anything approaching Harry's height; Harry wasn't especially tall but compared to the thirteen-year olds he was huge. Eventually the grating hem hem of Umbridge sounded from within and the class filed in to take their seats (Harry's was slightly bigger than the rest).

The class was as Harry remembered, with a few more Ministry posters dotted around in light of the recent attacks; Umbridge obviously thought they were reassuring, but the pictures of stern Aurors and Fudge looking comically heroic failed to have that effect.

"Good morning!" she said brightly, seated at the front desk in one of her revolting cardigans. Harry repeated the words back at her almost on reflex; he done it for an entire academic year in his Fifth year, and the rest of the class followed, having already had her spiel in their first lesson with her the previous week.

"Wands away please. Begin reading chapter two from your textbooks. Mr. Potter, please come to the front of the class to discuss the work you missed."

Harry gritted his teeth and walked to the front of the room, thinking hard about how he needed to keep his temper under control. Once he was at the front desk, Umbridge waved her wand and Harry felt the

familiar feeling of a localised silencing ward settle around them. Evidently this talk was to be private.

“Mr. Potter, I know you feel yourself to be somewhat better than your fellow students, but you must learn that taking time off will not go unpunished, so I want you to complete the homework you failed to collect last lesson, and I will be taking five points from Gryffindor for you not coming to see me sooner.” She said all of this with a sickly smile on her face, evidently wanting Harry to react.

“Certainly, Professor Umbridge, I’ll have that for you tomorrow.” Harry said dully, trying not to rise to her bait, knowing that any Third Year work would take him minutes to complete.

“Additionally, Mr. Potter, if I find you spreading any... lies amongst your fellow students, I shall have to take action. Do I make myself clear?”

“Certainly, Professor Umbridge.”

“Turn out your pockets, Potter.”

Harry’s blood ran cold. His enchanted stone was in his pocket, along with a piece of paper detailing the results of his training session and some of the spells to get reacquainted with next time he had a chance. Cursing himself for his foolishness, he reached a hand slowly into his pocket and managed to cast a wandless disillusionment on the offending items, before pulling out his wand and some spare ink. Umbridge looked disappointed, tried not to show it as she looked at his turned out pockets. Finally she dismissed him back to his seat, where Harry had an incredibly boring lesson of trying to read the textbook and failing to take an interest.

So far he had dodged the proverbial bullet. Umbridge was obviously sniffing around but couldn’t do anything overt as Harry wasn’t really doing anything wrong apart from being an illegal vigilante and a member of the Order, despite not attending meetings.

Now all he had to do was endure the stupid remarks of Malfoy in his next lesson and he would be fine.

Ooo
oooooooooooooooooooooO

As it turned out Malfoy hadn't changed, he had simply got less vulgar due to his age. Harry studiously ignored his snide comments about half-giants and freaks while he listened to the partially-limbed Kettleburn lecture on crup husbandry. The man was quite interesting, despite missing an arm and part of his right leg, and seemed disinterested in everything besides Magical Creatures. Despite this, Harry missed Hagrid.

The remainder of the day passed swiftly and in a layer of mediocrity. Third Year work was boring, there was no other description for it. McGonagall and Snape, when he saw them, treated him indifferently and McGonagall still deducted Harry house points for not paying attention to her lecture. After one academic day back at Hogwarts Harry was already bored – the nostalgia of experiencing school life again had been swept away by the new conflict brewing, and seeing previously dead students walking around lost its appeal fast. Percy studiously ignored him, Diggory didn't care about Harry apart from staring at him because of his growth and most of his "friends" were mildly irritating.

Something needed to happen to shake them up.

In preparation for this something Harry found himself sneaking to see Snape in his office after-hours that night, under the cover of the Invisibility cloak and with the aid of the Map, which he had procured from Fred and George over the weekend. He encountered no ghosts or students on the way down, and found himself in front of the imposing oak door in short order. The Map told him Snape was behind it, seemingly working. He knocked quietly and waited for the man to open the door, looking irate and smelling of potions fumes, before slipping past him (not easy given Harry's size) and removing the cloak. Snape jumped as he closed the door and turned around, whipping out his wand with a gasp of shock.

"Potter! What the hell are you doing in my office at this time?" he snapped.

“I’ve come to ask you for some help.”

“The great Potter, asking for help? Whatever next?”

“Amusing. I need some potions brewed, mainly battle-brews and some medicinal. With Voldemort”- Snape’s face tightened – “probably mobilising, as you well know, I’ll need some things to help me. Anything to give the edge, and I know the Aurors get some standard-issue stuff I won’t have unless you help me out.”

“Potter, I will probably never like you. But despite this, I am duty-bound to aid you. I shall mix up a small batch of potions for you. I also feel I should inform you that I have to do the same for the Dark Lord since, as I have already told Albus, he is evidently preparing for something. Be on your guard. I am diluting the Death Eaters’ potions to reduce their effectiveness; it will be simple to pin the blame on poor ingredients, and in any case by the time the authorities are through with them feedback about bad potions will hopefully be the last thing on their minds.”

“I was expecting him to try something this weekend, never fear. I’ll be ready for him. I appreciate this, Snape.” Harry said, putting the cloak back over his head, his business complete.

“I hope this Phoenix character will also lend a hand. Merlin knows we could use one,” Snape said with an uncharacteristic sigh, sitting down in his office chair. Harry grinned under the cloak and left the room silently, already mentally running through the spells he still had to revise. Saturday would make or break the Order’s campaign and hopefully bring it into the public eye.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

The first time Ron and Hermione had had a Hogsmeade trip, in which Harry had been absent, it had snowed. This time it was merely overcast. The third years had all gotten up especially early on the Saturday morning in preparation for the Hogsmeade trip, with Ron being irritatingly perky in Harry’s eyes. His size no longer drew

unnecessary attention, except from visitors to the castle, and it had garnered a small article in the Prophet as well as a (larger, apparently) section in Witch Weekly earlier that week which was largely overlooked. Colin Creevey had supplied the photos. Harry had not been pleased.

“Come on Harry!” Ron said as they headed down the steps into the Entrance Hall to be ticked off, “I can’t wait to get to Honeydukes!”

If he was honest with himself Harry was looking forward to getting out of the castle as well. He felt stifled by the regimen of boring lessons and simple homework, and Umbridge had not made things easier. Her lessons were less confrontational than before, but her Educational Decrees had already begun, stating that “potentially subversive” gossip was to be reported to a member of staff. So far no one had bothered.

They met Hermione at the foot of the main stairs and filed past Filch (who had Harry’s consent form ‘signed’ by Vernon Dursley) and into the crisp autumn air. It was mild, so Harry had chosen to wear a plain jumper and black trousers, aiming to make it tight fitted if he had to move quickly. In his pockets he had his wand, the enchanted stone and a small magically shrunken and cushioned pack of potions that Snape had delivered the day before.

He noted subtle heat hazes on the sides of the road leading into Hogsmeade – disillusioned Order members. Dumbledore had fully briefed Harry the evening before on who would be doing what; Mad-Eye was the overall commander of the Order operation, with Kingsley promising to keep Auror squads on alert for “training purposes” in the Ministry. Most of the Order would be in Hogsmeade waiting for any signs of trouble; Death Eaters had been spotted moving around in the village, but they were seemingly innocent for now, purchasing the occasional butterbeer or running errands. They were by no means the high ranking inner circle, merely underlings who lived ‘normal’ lives when not attending to their Lord. Snape had reported nothing unusual apart from the equipping of Death Eaters with wands and potions; this in itself wasn’t particularly suspicious as that would just be a natural upgrade of the forces rather than preparation for an

attack. However Snape was not the quartermaster for Voldemort so he couldn't say what else was being purchased.

They reached the village in short order, with Hogwarts students of varying ages milling around the main shopping street and intermingling with the locals. Harry was barely listening or contributing to Ron and Hermione's chatter as they strolled along beside his tall form; he was more preoccupied with spotting Order plainclothes guards – Dung, Hestia Jones and Sturgis Podmore were just some of the people 'out shopping'.

Harry went in and out of several shops as the morning wore on; he purchased a variety of sweets in Honeydukes, examined some jokes in Zonko's (he realised Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes was actually far better quality and value, in hindsight) and endorsed Ron's idea of a butterbeer before lunch as it neared midday. He had seen the occasional shady character as he wandered around, and attracted a few stares himself, but nothing that warranted him taking action. It was just a normal day in late autumn.

Maybe Voldemort wasn't going to attack at all.

No sooner was the thought formed in his mind as he strolled towards the Three Broomsticks with his friends, he spotted Walden Macnair walking out of the pub and into a side alley, looking mildly suspicious. He was a tall man with shaggy black hair and a long black set of robes which hid his frame well. He moved shiftily, as if expecting someone to follow him.

Alarm bells rang in his mind. Macnair was a confirmed Death Eater. He was in Hogsmeade.

"I'll meet you guys in a minute, I think I left my money pouch in Zonko's," he said to Ron and Hermione, "grab me a butterbeer and a seat, I won't be long."

They promised to save him a place and he darted off away from the pub into the crowd. Once he was sure he had lost his friends, Harry doubled back and went into the alley one building across from the one Macnair had entered. He stole along the dirty-walled passage,

listening intently, and found a side passage which connected the two. He pulled out his wand and disillusioned himself, looking around for anybody following him. Apart from the occasional person passing the entrance to the alley, there was no one around. Harry crept down the side alley and looked around the corner with an invisible head.

Macnair was standing in the alleyway next to the Three Broomsticks, crouched next to the wall and muttering a spell. Harry saw a small light flaring from the end of the man's wand and into the wall of the pub, creating a man-sized intricate latticework of white lines which Harry recognised as a series of blasting hexes.

So maybe Voldemort was attacking after all.

Harry whispered the activation word for his enchanted stone, feeling his outfit transfigure and change shape invisibly, before cancelling the disillusionment charm and striding out round the corner towards Macnair, who still had his back to Harry.

"Perfect day for it, eh Walden?" the Phoenix said merrily, causing Macnair to start and dive forward, shooting a cutting curse over his shoulder which Harry batted away with a gloved hand.

"Avada Kedavra," he spat, sending a green Killing curse howling down the narrow alleyway into Macnair's unprotected lower back, burning neatly through his robes and slamming into his flesh. The man slumped forward into the alley's dirt floor, lifeless. Harry strode up to him and rolled him over, ignoring the frozen look of anger on Macnair's face and then began to rifle through his cloak using the fading light of the blasting hexes to see clearly.

Macnair had a Death Eater's mask inside his robe as well as a small black rock made of onyx as a voice-activated Portkey. Harry then saw he was wearing a necklace, unusual for a male Death Eater. There was a blood red stone pendant attached to the fine silver chain, which was glowing brightly. As Harry studied it the light slowly died from the chain, and Harry jerked back as Macnair's Portkey activated, sending him whirling away to an unknown destination.

A dead-man's Portkey. So someone knew what Harry had done.

Bugger.

As he stood up, pulled out his pistol, and rushed back to the entrance of the alleyway to warn the Order, his cloak flapping around him as he ran. Nearing the main street, Harry heard a series of shouts on the air, echoing from all over the village of Hogsmeade.

“Morsmordre!”

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Sitting in his office reading an Order report on Death Eater finances, Dumbledore peered over his half moon glasses as Fawkes began to shift from place to place on his gilded perch, looking uneasy.

“Hmm... are you quite all right, Fawkes?” he said quietly, placing the report down and stroking the magnificent bird on its slender neck. Fawkes was staring intently at the window facing down into the grounds, so Dumbledore got up and walked round his old desk to look out of the small window, which afforded a spectacular view of the Forbidden Forest and Hogsmeade.

As far as he could see, all was quiet. As he looked at the village, smoke gently curling into the morning air from several chimneys, one of his ward reporters, set up on Harry’s insistence, burst into life on his desk, wailing shrilly and glowing green.

An Unforgivable had been cast in Hogsmeade. As Dumbledore looked from the reporter back out of the window, several green jets silently shot into the sky from the village, blossoming into skulls with serpents protruding from their mouths.

The Dark Mark.

“Fawkes! Warn Kingsley the worst has happened, and then go and restrain Sirius in the Shrieking Shack. We cannot have him engage the Death Eaters. I will round up the staff and go and assist the Order. Hurry!” he shouted, sprinting surprisingly fast out of his office and

down the stairs, firing off several silver Patronuses to the staff members he knew could help him. As he reached the bottom of the stairs he smacked his hand onto the head of the gargoyle and shouted an incantation to put the Castle herself on alert, a system which Harry had also encouraged him to update just in case. Within seconds a calm female voice echoed through the corridors.

“Could all students please go to their Common Rooms immediately, do not panic. All staff members assemble in the Great Hall and await further instruction from the Headmaster.”

The message began to repeat as Dumbledore sprinted faster than he had run in years to the Great Hall, seeing various students emerge from the library and bathrooms looking confused and frightened, even more so at the sight of their venerable Headmaster running along with his beard streaming after him.

He just hoped he would be in time to stop the students being harmed.

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Harry sprinted at full pelt out of the alleyway, narrowly avoiding a screaming group of fourth years. He skidded to a halt and grabbed the tallest one, a terrified boy (evidently a wizard, as he was afraid of the Marks).

“Run! Get everyone you can and head for the castle! Death Eaters are attacking!” he barked, ignoring the look of shock on the boy’s face and moving swiftly on after giving him orders. He could see no Death Eaters yet the Marks, over a dozen of them, hovered ominously over the panicking crowd. Harry saw several Order members ordering the children to run for the castle as the residents of the village began to collect their families and head for their homes.

“Sonorous!” Harry cast on himself, aware that several people were pointing at him in his costume standing near the Three Broomsticks.

“Hogwarts students, run for the castle immediately! Do not stop to pick up belongings or your shopping, your personal safety is

paramount. This is not a hoax!" he bellowed, his magical voice cutting over the screams and loud calls of the throng of students and residents. As people turned and took notice of him, several nearby nondescript residents pulled out their wands and fired spells directly at Harry, who was forced to duck and whip his wand in an arc to knock the worst of them away.

The students seemed to get the picture all at once, and began to leg it down the main street towards the road to the castle, as the mysterious Hogsmeade residents kept up their assault on Harry, who was rolling and ducking to avoid the spells, which were extremely nasty curses. Quickly the main street began to clear somewhat as the majority of the students evacuated it, leaving the Order, Harry, some remaining Hogwarts pupils and three dozen residents, all of whom were now either attacking the Phoenix or shooting at Order members.

Harry realised they were under Polyjuice just as the air itself seemed to be rent in two by the force of nearly a hundred simultaneous Portkeys appearing up and down the main street, along with anti-Apparition wards being thrown up around the borders of the village and train station. The deafening clatter of boots slamming into cobblestones staggered Harry momentarily, who found himself surrounded by a plethora of black and red robed bodies as the Aurors and Death Eaters arrived simultaneously, knocking nearly everyone off balance. Harry took advantage of the arrival confusion to open fire with his pistol on the nearest Death Eaters to him, scything down five in short order before leaping, assisted by a charm, onto the roof of the Three Broomsticks to survey the street below.

In less than a second it was chaos. The Portkeys had all gone off course due to the sheer volume of transportation magic being forced into the street, making the arrival locations of the various factions totally random. The Aurors, Polyjuiced residents and Death Eaters were cut down in equal numbers as the road literally blossomed into a multicoloured cauldron of magic shields, spells and fire. Within five seconds the Aurors had fallen a short distance back down the road towards Dervish and Banges, while the Death Eaters did the same in the opposite direction, making a rough crowd of two sides facing each other between the Three Broomsticks and Honeydukes, several buildings along from where Harry was crouched. He looked towards

Hogwarts and saw a cluster of cloaked figures sprinting down the road towards the rear of the Death Eaters, evidently the teachers, and hoped that the students had gotten out safely. In the road he could see several bodies, mainly of Death Eaters and Aurors, but there were a few black-robed figures too small to be adults. Harry's blood ran cold.

He was crouched, weapons in hand, right next to the main throng of Death Eaters, numbering perhaps forty masked men as well as the Polyjuiced residents who had cast the Marks, probably the vanguard of Voldemort's forces as there were no Inner Circle members or the big man himself. Presumably cannon fodder, as that was what Harry was about to make them before they entered the pub he was perched on to threaten the patrons.

He disillusioned himself, making himself pretty much invisible to the naked eye when placed against the overcast sky, and took a running leap off of the edge of the Three Broomsticks. For a moment he hung in the air, his barely visible cloak streaming out behind him and his arms and legs outstretched, before he fired a golden spell downwards into the mass of black below him which shot through the air with a thunderous roar.

The unfortunate Death Eater hit by the spell Harry fired simply exploded violently, bone and gore flung outwards at lethal speed, sending the Death Eater crowd sprawling and even killing the people next to the man who had died. Harry landed neatly and unseen in the blood-splattered hole he had opened for himself, already in the midst of flicking his wand in a series of movements which caused blue diamond-like darts to erupt from the end at a fantastic rate, tearing through two or three Death Eaters before exploding in small flashes of light. The force of the spell caused Harry's disillusionment to fail, not that that mattered with the sheer hectic disarray he had sent the Death Eater's into. The Aurors had begun to fire stunners and other disabling spells down the road and the small vanguard was in full rout within seconds of Harry going all out with his pistol and Killing Curses. It only took thirty seconds for the last Death Eater to fall, signalling the end of the first wave of fighting. The Aurors began to run down the road towards the Phoenix, who merely turned his head to look at

them amidst the dead and stunned Death Eaters and then vanished under a disillusionment charm.

Harry saw in the brief lull in the fighting the remainder of the students, including Ron and Hermione ran out of their various refuges, screaming and crying as they stumbled past the Aurors and over the corpses of the fallen to run past the teachers, who had finally reached Hogsmeade. Dumbledore, Flitwick and McGonagall were present, with the rest of the teachers probably helping the students. Harry was satisfied, having resumed his invisible perch on top of the Three Broomsticks, that there were no innocents remaining in the village.

But would Voldemort know that? Fully half of the Auror forces were dead or incapacitated, leaving around twenty of them along with ten Order members and the teachers. Evidently the Death Eaters were more capable of using deadly force in a pinch in the initial confusion. They had all gathered in front of the massacred Death Eaters, the Auror commander talking to Voldemort while the other Aurors began to scan the deserted village for remaining Death Eaters with human detection spells and transfigured the corpses and stunned Death Eaters into small fist-sized blue rocks for collection and identification.

Harry felt it rather than saw it. An immense pressure on the wards surrounding the village, a buzzing in his ears that refused to go away. Darkness clouded his vision as the pressure mounted, until finally there was a sound like breaking glass and Lord Voldemort apparated into Hogsmeade by Honeydukes, accompanied by his Inner Circle and eighty Death Eaters, arranged in a rough circle around their master.

Harry immediately removed the disillusionment charm on himself as his allies below formed ranks preparing for battle, Dumbledore at their head.

"Riddle! I'm here!" he shouted.

All eyes turned to him, the Phoenix, standing in blood splattered red robed on top of the empty Three Broomsticks, flames licking at the hem of his cloak.

Everyone waited to see what would happen next.

A/N: To pre-empt some complaints, Harry's enhanced firearm is fully automatic and he can fire Killing Curses as fast as he can say them until he gets tired, so yes he could have killed around two dozen Death Eaters while they didn't know what was happening. In addition the Death Eaters were basically thugs given masks.

Chapter 15 – Who are you?

Lord Voldemort apparated into Hogsmeade by Honeydukes, accompanied by his Inner Circle and eighty Death Eaters, arranged in a rough circle around their master.

Harry immediately removed the disillusionment charm on himself as his allies below formed ranks preparing for battle, Dumbledore at their head.

“Riddle! I’m here!” he shouted.

All eyes turned to him, the Phoenix, standing in blood splattered red robes on top of the empty Three Broomsticks, flames licking at the hem of his cloak.

Everyone waited to see what would happen next.

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

It was him.

The Phoenix.

Lord Voldemort’s teeth clenched as he looked at the mysterious figure who had caused much rumour in his ranks. It seemed his advance guard were all dead at the feet of the Aurors and the blasted Order. No matter, they were less than expendable. Most of them weren’t even human, as the Aurors would discover if they ever got round to examining the Polyjuiced villagers.

He was dressed in charmed robes of finest silk woven with Dragon scales, making a flexible but solid battle outfit, and he wielded his yew wand as well as some other tricks to be employed in the heat of battle. Surrounding him on three sides were his Inner Circle, people like Rowle and Malfoy, all slightly shorter than the imposing Dark Lord and wearing ornate silver Death Eater masks. He had yet to break out his most valued supporters, and some of them couldn’t participate in the raid because of having to keep their public cover, so they

weren't the elite he hoped for. In a large horde, restrained by the relatively narrow street, were his Death Eater minions deemed worthy of being outfitted by the quartermaster with a spare wand and potion kit, for battling the majority of the Auror battalions soon to come. The sun refused to peek out from behind the storm-grey clouds swirling above the battlefield, the weather becoming turbulent in response to the magic concentrated below. Still hovering overhead like macabre balloons were the Dark Marks cast earlier, their skulls grinning down on the battlefield below. Otherwise, Hogsmeade was a ghost town.

A perfect place for killing his enemies and assuming the mantle of the Dark Lord of Great Britain.

"Ah... the Phoenix," he said calmly, his mouth quirked up in a sardonic smile and his voice amplified by a wandless sonorous charm. "We meet at last."

"You and me, Riddle, leave your lackeys out of this!" the Phoenix shouted, causing the collective heads of all assembled to turn to face him. Voldemort spotted Dumbledore at the head of the crowd of Aurors. This was going to get ugly.

"You and I? I'm afraid if you want to have the... honour of facing me in single combat you will have to get through my esteemed Inner circle of Death Eaters," he said, waving a hand to indicate the silent sentinels in front of him. "Enjoy."

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

"Casualties are at roughly fifty percent and we can't Portkey or Apparate in or out. Dawlish said over eighty hostiles Apparated straight through the Auror grade wards he cast on arrival, and we don't even know the identity of the attackers in the village! We have student casualties Minister! Children have died, and we even got claims of the Dark Mark being cast!" Kingsley shouted over the noise of the Auror operations room, a large room with several fireplaces, dominated by the large magical map of Hogsmeade pinned to the wall, showing the last magical signatures captured before the village was made unscryable by forces unknown (to the Ministry at least,

Kingsley knew it was Voldemort). It showed a hazy cluster of red dots, Aurors, with some white civilian dots clustered in the main street, with one particularly bright light on a rooftop, facing a group of black dots which represented the unknown attackers. A list next to the map showed Aurors currently deployed, as well as Aurors whose dead-man Portkeys had activated or failed to activate when they should have, indicating casualty rates. People were working furiously in fireplaces on the other walls or scribbling onto parchment as Kingsley and Fudge stood in the middle of it all, debating on their next move.

“Be that as it may Shacklebolt, I feel the Ministry should be more cautious before committing its forces! We don’t know what’s down there! If it’s the copycat attackers...”

“Sir, with all due respect, we need to send everything we have down there and we need to do it as fast as we can. I’ve pulled everyone available bar the Azkaban guards and am assembling them now to be double-timed to the nearest Plottable point of insertion. Umbridge has assured us the castle is locked down with all the students who made it out, but Dumbledore has gone to the village himself.”

“D-Dumbledore? That old fool is meddling in a Ministry operation? I’ll have him for this!” Fudge crowed, taking his bowler hat off of his head in triumph and turning to dictate to his secretary about filing a legal injunction against Dumbledore. Kingsley gave him a look of disgust and nodded at an orderly standing patiently by the main fireplace to authorise the Auror battalion to move out as fast as possible. They would be arriving a good mile from Hogsmeade and then had to get to the place on foot, as Hogwarts’ wards prevented them from going anywhere else but the Forbidden Forest, which was madness given the situation.

He just hoped forty Aurors would be enough.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

“Enjoy.”

There was precisely one second of calm before Harry's perch was simply obliterated by a plethora of magical energy, and the two opposing parties of wizards were linked by tongues of coloured power impacting on globular shields.

Harry himself had disillusioned himself again and leapt down onto street level, keeping low to avoid the first salvos of spell-fire. The Inner circle and Voldemort had retreated further up the road to wait, motionless, while the main bulk of Voldemort's forces engaged the Aurors, Order and teachers. Harry ran unseen as fast as he could down the road parallel to the shops, aiming for the side of the Death Eater lines where there was only one column of people firing over each other's heads to force his way through.

He was within ten feet of the first Death Eater when the man he was aiming for evidently noticed something unusual, as he flung a Killing Curse in Harry's direction, causing Harry to duck into a slide and begin to open fire with his pistol. The man whirled to one side, letting the bullets hit his unfortunate companion behind him, and fired off another Killing Curse which Harry couldn't move to avoid. It slammed into the main body of Harry's firearm, splintering it into fragments and causing a tingly backlash of magic up Harry's arm which he shook his veiled limb to vanish. Growling in anger behind his bandana, the Phoenix brandished his wand and recovered back into a run.

"Evertoxuro!" he snapped, and a sheet of dirty magical fire blossomed from the end of his wand with a roar, engulfing several Death Eaters and sending them flailing backwards into their compatriots, who were blinded by the thick smoke. Harry then finally reached the Death Eater lines, cancelled his flamethrower-like spell and began to fire small bursts of white energy which exploded into blinding flashes of light when they hit a surface, dazzling all the combatants in the road who looked directly at them. He jumped, assisted by a charm, over the heads of the majority of the Death Eaters, still firing the blinding spells from his hand and wand, and hit the ground running on the other side of the formation, which was still wholly engaged on fighting the Aurors and blinking off the effects of Harry's spells.

"Bravo, Phoenix!" Voldemort said mockingly, clapping his hands slowly. "Now you shall die."

Harry cancelled his disillusionment charm, reasoning that the Inner circle would be well versed enough in the Dark Arts to be able to see through it anyway, and stood ready, secure that no Death Eater would dare attack him from behind when he was Voldemort's target. Two Inner circle Death Eaters rushed forward, their silver masks glinting in the spell light from the battling groups behind Harry, and fired a pair of spells at Harry.

He merely sidestepped both spells, allowing them to hit the Death Eaters behind him, and fired off three in return faster than the Inner circle members could react. One of them hit the ground hard, buckling and spasming in agony as his right arm was violently twisted as though it was being wrung out like a cloth and his stomach was sliced open neatly, filling the inside of his robes with organs and other viscera. He moaned quietly behind his mask and fell still.

The other combatant whirled to avoid Harry's blue spell and turned to face him again, holding himself arrogantly as though he had pulled off a major feat of combat. As he turned a fourth spell slammed into his mask, dissolving it with powerful acid and eating clean into his head, hollowing out his face as though it was a smooth red bowl of bubbling flesh. He fell to his knees and pitched face first onto the ground, causing a stream of thick red blood to pool underneath him and wisps of smoke to rise off of his corpse. Harry recognised Avery from the remaining hair left on the man's rapidly vanishing skull.

"I'm impressed and overawed by your minions' power, Riddle." Harry said in a deadpan voice, taking a couple more steps forward down the cobbled road towards Voldemort and his Death Eaters. "But I have to reiterate: I want to fight you alone."

Voldemort sneered, but looked slightly less confident than he had before. Finally he let a calm demeanour slip over his handsome face, and gestured imperceptibly with his wand. All eighteen remaining Inner circle members raised their wands and began to run towards Harry in a staggered line, firing spells as they went.

He didn't move until the first few spells were about to hit him, then he sprung into action, leaping impossibly high into the air and firing a

salvo of concussion spells into the ground beneath him. The Inner Circle members were knocked largely off balance by the massive earth tremors that occurred, allowing Harry to land gracefully where he had jumped from and run forward into the now staggered group firing several spells of his own.

“COME ON THEN! Impliation! Fetirix! Avada Kedavra! Ventrus!” he bellowed, finishing by shoulder charging the first stumbling Death Eater and punting the man away with a blasting curse on impact. Two more of the Death Eaters fell, one of them visibly rotting away under his robes and another gurgling as he struggled to remove a gigantic iron spike stuck into his chest. Harry followed up by causing several more blinding explosions of light as he began to fire more spells into the Death Eaters he was moving among, but having less luck as they began to throw up shields.

He backhanded one Inner Circle member brutally with a red nimbus playing around his hand, the man’s head literally driven off of his shoulders in a shower of bloody trachea and bone, and then fired an overcharged shocking hex into the chest of another Death Eater, causing the victim’s body to glow blue behind his mask as a thick rope of lightning connected his body to Harry’s wand. As soon as he had cast the spells, Harry back-flipped out of the host of enemies to give himself some space, noticing the survivors now pulling out their spare wands and downing (ineffective) potions to give them better reactions before Harry recommenced his attack.

But Harry had more tricks up his sleeve. He pulled out a number of marbles from his pocket as he was in the air, transfiguring them into crude animals, more shapes with teeth and claws than anything, and dropped them into the enemies below. The Inner Circle shouted and cursed in confusion as they were set about by ravenous marble monsters, but the transfigured marbles were largely beaten back by the time Harry had landed and steadied himself – the Inner Circle were not Voldemort’s best available fighters for nothing.

Behind him the melee still raged, the duels now becoming closer and more personal as the Order and Aurors forged a salient into the heart of the Death Eater mass, the Death Eaters slowly losing their numerical advantage as it worked against them in the packed street.

Harry could hear Dumbledore's booming voice shouting curses and binding hexes, evidently aiming to disable the Death Eaters rather than kill them, as well as the sounds of fighting in the narrow alleyways between shops. As he listened, his concentration lapsed and he was surprised to feel a bludgeoning hex slam into his abdomen, sending him sprawling onto the cobbles gasping for air as his red cloak flew around him. As quickly as he had fallen Harry rolled, dodging several Killing curses as well as other spells, and got to his feet to dive into the nearest building, which happened to be the Post Office, blowing the door clean off of its hinges. Inside the post owls had all flown to safety along with the students, evidently sensing danger, so Harry was given a few seconds of respite to get to his feet and fish for his potions pouch.

He grabbed the first vial he felt and pulled it out before downing it, feeling the refreshing Pepper-Up potion coursing through his gullet and stomach before filling his body with warmth and vigour, complementing the adrenaline rush in his veins. Discarding the empty vial Harry paused for a minute, fired a powerful blasting curse through the window of the Post Office, as well as several more of the blinding flashes, before sprinting out of the door and throwing himself into a roll to avoid the inevitable spells which flashed overhead like deadly lightning.

Around a dozen Inner Circle members remained standing, most of them dual wielding wands. Harry finished his roll and found himself staring down their wands from behind his bandana as they arranged themselves into a semicircle around the Post Office door.

"As they say, Phoenix, game over." Voldemort murmured from where he stood just behind the half-circle.

With that, over twenty vicious spells blasted into the Phoenix's crouching, hooded form, only to sail straight through and tear the pavement to hot shreds, leaving nothing but a small burning crater. In response six silver Effodio spells rocketed out of the Post Office's broken window and blew holes in several unprepared Inner Circle members, cracking their ornate masks and rupturing their vital organs as the spells passed straight through, while the rest deflected the

powerful curses. The Phoenix strode calmly out of the door of the Post Office, his wand and fingers glowing faintly white.

“If you can’t even tell a construct from a real person, Tom, then you’re failing a bit as you get older.”

“Enough of this!” Voldemort spat, incensed by the use of his real name. He pushed roughly past his surviving Inner Circle members, his hair moving as he drew his power around him. “You die here and now! Avada Kedavra!”

Harry delicately sidestepped the deadly curse, not even flinching as it shot through the door past his ear and burst into green flames behind him, setting the Post Office interior ablaze with magical fire.

“You’re on,” he said quietly, flicking his wand gracefully in a languid arc, before gritting his teeth and thrusting it forward violently, sending a cloud of pink marble-sized balls at Voldemort, who slashed his wand to knock them aside. The Inner Circle looked at their master and left him to duel the Phoenix, running into the multicoloured melee between the Aurors and the Death Eater hordes.

Harry lunged at Voldemort, firing off a Killing Curse while enveloping his right hand in a blue cloud of magic. Voldemort skilfully jinked aside to dodge the Killing Curse, and raised an opaque dark green bubble to block Harry’s magically-aided punch. On impact the bubble was dented and then finally shattered into dust under the force of the blow, and Harry brought his wand up to unleash a close range Sectumsempra curse into Voldemort’s side, which was blocked as Voldemort slapped the wand aside. Harry followed up by body-checking the Dark Lord, assisted by a Blasting Curse, sending Voldemort staggering back.

“Crucio!” Riddle snarled once he had recovered, sending the blood red Cruciatus at Harry from point-blank range – Harry simply threw himself flat on the ground and fired a blinding flash of light from the end of his wand followed by a curse which snaked between the cobblestones like a yellow river, liquefying them into a smoking pool of acid. The Phoenix then quickly got to his feet, batting away a

Bone-breaker curse with his left hand and stabbing his wand into an oncoming thick orange jet of light to dissipate it harmlessly.

I can't even kill him, Harry thought desperately as he parried another vicious curse from Voldemort, he's still got two Horcruxes. And there are too many combatants to fight him properly. I have to get rid of them. As he raised a purple shield with his left hand Harry brandished his wand like a whip, pointing at the building behind Voldemort.

"Arcesso Fiendfyre!" he yelled, sending a red-hot bolt of magic flying through the window of the deserted house. There was a small flicker of light from inside before all the windows and doors were blown out of their frames with a crackling roar, the fire immediately consuming the house from within in a vicious backdraft.

"Fiendfyre, Phoenix?" Riddle said almost in surprise, before ducking to avoid Harry's Killing Curse. "You mean to burn this village to the ground?"

"Hopefully to take you with it, Tom," Harry said, literally grabbing one of Voldemort's Inversion curses with what looked like a blue glove of magic and hurling it back at him as he sent another Fiendfyre bolt into the Post Office, which was already blazing with green Killing Curse fire. Smoke began to rise into the air as the tortured screams of the magical fire animals echoed down the main street, obscuring the Dark Marks with ash and causing some of the weaker and injured Death Eaters to activate their ward-keyed Portkeys to escape.

Harry fired off a third Fiendfyre curse and then threw himself at the Dark Lord again, casting a concussion spell to knock Voldemort off balance. He grabbed the front of the Dark Lord's robes, gripping his wand-holding wrist with his free hand.

"You'll burn with me!" he screamed, head-butting Voldemort in the face and bringing a Killing curse to bear. Voldemort's head snapped back, his aristocratic nose bloodied, but he retained enough presence of mind to knock Harry's feet from underneath him to send the Killing curse awry. Harry clung doggedly onto the Dark Lord's wrist as he stumbled; slashing across the man's cloaked stomach with his wand.

"Sectumsemptra!" he hissed, satisfied with the deep gash that opened in the armoured robes and the blood that spurted out onto Harry's red outfit. Voldemort howled with rage and his body became unbearably hot to hold, the very air around the man becoming thick with magic. Harry was hurled away by the backlash, managing to right himself with a levitation charm and landing several metres from Voldemort, whose face looked indescribably livid behind his hair, which was in disarray from the static charge from his magic.

"WHO ARE YOU?" he roared in terrible anger, raising his hand into the air and slamming it into the ground with a flash of dark purple light. When Harry could see again Voldemort was gone, replaced by a smoking web of purple lines in the cobblestones and the howling of the Fiendfyre creatures as they consumed the buildings they were in and began to spread along the street, rebuffed by the levels of magic being cast in the main road.

Harry cast a filtering spell over his eyes, and immediately ducked as he saw Voldemort lashing out with a Killing Curse at point-blank range, the filter turning the Dark Lord into a hazy figure of purple smoke against the bright orange of the Fiendfyre. Harry retaliated with a snap-kick to Voldemort's ankles before casting the counter-charm to Voldemort's advanced disillusionment (which Harry didn't use owing to the unsubtle effects of casting it), sending the Dark Lord flashing back into the visible realm.

"WHO ARE YOU?" Voldemort howled again, hurling a Killing Curse at Harry as he staggered back.

"I'm the Phoenix," Harry shouted over the din of the duels between the Death Eaters and the Order, before blocking the Killing Curse with some stone and resuming the lightning-fast duel.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

"Stupefy! Solemnious! Dolor!" Dumbledore roared, firing a trio of spells with one wand movement at the multitude of Death Eaters in front of him. Three Death Eaters keeled over, incapacitated, but Dumbledore had already moved onto transfiguring another pair into

rocks before using them to knock some more Death Eaters unconscious.

As some had said, the man had style.

“DUMBLEDORE! WE HAVE TO FALL BACK! THAT’S FIENDFYRE BURNING THOSE BUILDINGS!” Dawlish yelled, blocking a golden flare of light with a slash of his wand, “WE’LL BE KILLED IF WE STAY, THE VILLAGE IS LOST!”

“Pull the Aurors back, Dawlish; I will cover your retreat!” Dumbledore said back, his voice quiet but amplified by a messaging spell so Dawlish heard him clearly over the noise of the battle. About twenty Order members and Aurors were fighting the Death Eaters in packs of ten in the crowded street, and the numbers were working in their favour – fully half the Death Eaters were dead or unconscious for but a few Auror casualties.

“Minerva! We’re pulling back; the Death Eaters are too strong!” Dumbledore ordered, sending all the Death Eaters sprawling with a particularly powerful concussion variant, the air itself distorting with the power. As the back row lurched backwards, Dumbledore caught a glimpse of the titanic duel between Harry and Voldemort, the red and black figures fighting almost hand-to-hand with spellflashes illuminating the street around them.

Behind him the Aurors began to run back down the road and out of the side alleys which some had fought in, casting various coloured shields to protect themselves and their friends as Dumbledore and McGonagall set to work covering them. The Transfiguration masters turned a dozen broken cobblestones into solid granite stags, sending them charging at incredible speed into the Death Eater lines, which broke like fish in a shoal before the stone animals. Seeing the Aurors retreat along with the teachers, the Death Eaters also activated their Portkeys to flee the battlefield, most of them having had enough of the fight.

Dumbledore ran down the road like a man possessed with McGonagall at his side, deflecting the odd spell from a defiant Death Eater who had stood his ground while his allies ran. Ahead of him he

saw a wall of red backs along with Filius, who was enhancing his speed with some clever use of levitation charms, and various Order members. As far as he could tell no Order member had fallen in the battle, but he had no way of knowing.

At last they reached the train station, some distance from the village proper, and Dumbledore looked back, panting heavily.

The village was a wreck. Five or six buildings were burning fiercely, sending great plumes of smoke into the sky like signal fires. Some Dark Marks remained from the initial casting, grinning evilly down on the blazing village. What was most striking, however, were the rapid flashes of multicoloured light that still emitted from the main street, just out of sight from where Dumbledore and the Aurors were regrouping up the hill to Hogwarts.

Harry.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

“Smoke, sir!” an Auror from the group taking point shouted, pointing to the top of the hill the Auror battalion was rapidly climbing.

Tonks looked up and saw what he meant; thick clouds of black smoke had begun to stretch into the sky like the devil's fingers. She dreaded what she would see when they got over the hill.

Tonks was in a squad of five Aurors, one of eight squads double-timing up the gravel path that lead up the grassy ridge overlooking Hogsmeade, which lay nestled in a picturesque shallow valley underneath Hogwarts. The Aurors had been Portkeyed nearly a mile away from Hogsmeade at the foot of the hill, and had spent a good ten minutes climbing it in relative silence, save for the muffled explosions and shouts they could hear on the wind coming from the village.

Most of them didn't even know what they would be facing.

“Sir, you’d better take a look at this,” said the first Auror to reach the top of the hill. Rufus Scrimgeour, head of the Auror detachment of the DMLE, ran past Tonks’ second-in-line squad from his rearguard group, his lion-like mane of hair blown back by the wind and his embroidered red and gold robes picking him out as the commander of the battalion. He crested the verdant hill and stopped dead, but Tonks could only see his back and the backs of the point squad.

“Sweet merciful Merlin...” Tonks heard him say, and she sprinted up the hill to see what he was looking at.

Hogsmeade was burning.

Tonks counted four Dark Marks marring the sky above the town, which was glowing with several intense fires blazing away in numerous buildings. From what Tonks could see the fire seemed to be pulsing and moving within itself, which looked wholly unnatural and possibly a sign of Dark Magic. Spellfire sparked and flashed in the main road, but the combatants were obscured by the thick smoke and buildings. The top of the hill was about half a kilometre from the village proper.

“Look, the first attack force!” an Auror next to her said, the rest of the forty-strong battalion having also reached the top of the hill. Tonks followed where he was pointing and saw a cluster of red figures by the train station, which was intact. Hogwarts loomed behind them, but there were no lights shining in the castle.

Things looked grim.

“We can’t move into the village until those fires are burned out or under control,” Scrimgeour barked. “We have no idea what kind of fire that is, and all we’d do is lose lives. I propose we skirt the village and meet up the first attack force, and hopefully Dumbledore, to get a sit-rep. Follow me!” he ordered, running carefully down the hill at an angle, to skirt the village and reach the Auror group, who had spotted them and sent up red sparks to signal their compatriots.

Tonks just hoped too many people hadn’t already died.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Harry heard the retreats of both factions rather than saw them, as he happened to be running extremely fast away from a Fiendfyre basilisk Voldemort had summoned at the time. By the time he had subdued the conflagration with magical water, everyone was gone bar the Inner Circle Death Eaters, who Voldemort ordered away while Harry took stock of the situation. The main street was slowly being consumed by the Fiendfyre, and the temperatures were becoming unbearably hot despite the cooling charms Harry had applied to his clothes. The two combatants had moved down the road towards the Three Broomsticks and the station away from the flames, and were now picking their way over corpses as they fired spells at each other.

But Voldemort seemed to be doing something new as Harry watched. After the Inner Circle members had Portkeyed away, leaving them alone, Voldemort looked at the various bodies strewn unceremoniously in the main road and began to mutter a spell and flick his wand in rapid sharp movements, as though trying to write on parchment while being stung by something. Finally, he thrust his wand straight into the air and boomed out a final syllable of whatever spell he had been casting, and Harry's jaw dropped in horror.

The corpses began to get up, black tendrils of magic swirling about their limbs as they rose from the ground, puppet-like.

Voldemort had animated Inferi in less than ten seconds flat, something Harry had never seen before. The man was a monster.

"Let's see how you handle my pets, Phoenix. I learned this particular variant when I was brought back to full power!"

Well that made sense; demons tended to impart dread knowledge such as reanimating the corpses of children as a matter of course.

Harry could only watch in shock as the cadaver of a Hogwarts fourth-year slowly got its balance, cracked a broken arm back into place, turned to face him and scowled in hate, its eyes blazing as red as the fires behind Harry. Six Inferi of varying origin arranged themselves

around Voldemort, who looked at them darkly, brushing his hair out of his eyes.

“Kill him,” he said, before hurling a Killing Curse at the Phoenix. Harry dodged the Killing Curse simply, before readying his strongest fire spells to kill the shambling monstrosities. But, again to his horror, they forced their recently-deceased bodies into a loping run, letting out an unearthly screech as they rapidly closed the gap between Voldemort and Harry, their eyes glowing an evil red. Unable to spend time thinking about this turn of events, Harry met the first one, a Death Eater whose robe was mostly burned away, with a magically-assisted punch, entirely disintegrating its head and sending the body flying backwards. As a child-Inferius reached him it leapt to attack, forcing Harry to cast a strong Sectumsempra to bisect it in the middle, its top half flailing and gnashing its teeth as he banished it into one of the Fiendfyre pyres that smouldered aggressively behind him.

Voldemort decided at this point to press his advantage, letting fly with a deadly combination of Unforgivables and other lethal curses. Harry was forced to shield the ones he could with the strongest shield he could muster with his left hand, a red crystalline construct which rang like a gong whenever a spell hit it. With his wand Harry began to set the remaining Inferi on fire, only to see that didn't affect the agile corpses in the slightest. He was forced to duck as another student-cadaver jumped clean over his head with a scream and he managed to blow an ex-Auror in twain with a brutal exploding hex to the stomach.

“You can't win, Phoenix!” Voldemort yelled mockingly, arcing yet another Killing Curse in Harry's direction, forcing the costumed hero to fling a blackened hunk of rock into the curse's path while removing an Inferius' legs. “Tell me who you are and I might just let you live.”

“I've told you,” the Phoenix shouted back, holding up his crystal shield (which was slowly exhausting him) and finishing off the last two Inferi by firing Effodio curses through their slackened, undead faces, “I'm the Phoenix.”

“That is not an answer!” Voldemort spat in rage, the air beginning to warp subtly around his form as he got steadily angrier. “You will submit to me, Phoenix, or die.”

Harry dropped the shield stood his ground, silhouetted against the cursed buildings behind him, which were now pillars of roaring flame, dotted with discernable shapes. “The day I submit to you is the day the Wizarding World falls. Here’s your answer!”

He took a deep breath, focusing, and started to run swiftly towards the Dark Lord, sidestepping smartly to avoid the Killing Curses that hissed past his head, and waved his wand in a wide sweep. Broken cobblestones warped and shifted into sharp blades of stone, before whizzing at the Dark Lord, forcing a surprised Voldemort to deal with the granite attackers, allowing Harry to get closer.

“This ends here!” the Phoenix bellowed, before bringing a Killing Curse to the end of his wand and leaping, assisted by a levitation charm, high into the air over Voldemort in a front flip. “Avada Kedavra!”

The green bolt, Harry’s hate personified into lethal killing magic, rocketed through the air towards the back of Voldemort’s unprotected head. But Voldemort was not one of the most dangerous men on the planet for nothing. Quicker than Harry would have thought possible, he turned and bent back sharply, the curse practically parting his hair as Riddle dodged. Voldemort’s wand shot forward like a viper, letting loose with a brown strangling curse in response, which met a silver piercing hex Harry had just fired.

“NO!” Harry yelled as he fell down to the ground, the two spells colliding in a burst of light as all time seemed to freeze, illuminating the two combatants in a flash of gold.

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Dumbledore hurried down the hill next to the station, aiming to meet Scrimgeour half-way and tell him what had happened. As he slid over

the grass, which was still damp from the morning dew, he heard a muffled explosion from Hogsmeade, and snapped his head to the left.

The thick columns of smoke were still spiralling lazily upwards and the fires were still burning, albeit less brightly now that the Fiendfyre's caster was no longer fuelling the flames, but that was not what Dumbledore was looking at. He was more preoccupied with the overwhelmingly bright yellow light beaming from between the houses and reflecting off of the windows, seemingly the product of some spell. As he watched the Dark Marks were overpowered and dispelled into nothing by a golden dome of magic, and a sound reached his ears, echoing over from the centre of the wrecked village with a haunting, beautiful melody.

Phoenix song.

Chapter 16 – Plan B

“NO!” Harry yelled as he fell down to the ground, the two spells colliding in a burst of light as all time seemed to freeze, illuminating the two combatants in a flash of gold.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

In one second, Harry’s plans fell apart in an explosion of beautiful light and song. He was blown hard into the ground, just managing to keep his balance, as the Priori Incantatem phenomenon took effect, much to Voldemort’s shock. The Dark Lord stared, transfixed, at the deep golden beam connecting their two wands, and gripped his yew weapon with two hands, as Harry grabbed his holly wand and held on with all his strength.

The Phoenix song got louder and louder in his ears, before finally the golden thread splintered into a myriad of light dendrites; like a fast growing tree they exploded outwards and interconnected to form a glistening golden dome above the two combatants. The hemisphere of magic expanded upwards and sideways until it filled the broken, destroyed main street, percolating through the walls of the houses that it met and fusing with the burnt debris destroyed by the Fiendfyre. Every time it touched flame the holocaustic fire guttered and died – not even the cursed flame could stand up to the combined power of Harry and Voldemort.

“What is this?” he heard Voldemort hiss, in what sounded like fear. The man’s robes, torn and bloodied, were whipping around him along with his hair, and his black eyes were wide as he stared, unblinking, at the thread. Harry’s robes were similarly flapping about, and he could smell the tang of ozone and taste almonds in the epicentre of the phenomenon.

He waited for a tense beat, and then saw the centre of the thread bulge slightly, like there were beads of radiant light threaded onto the beam of magic. As soon as they had formed, he put all other thoughts of revenge and battle strategy out of his mind and slammed his will into the beads, forcing them down the thread rapidly as Voldemort

fought to understand what was happening. As he inched closer and closer to ramming the beads down the Dark Lord's wand, Harry's emotions began to boil up.

"This is IT, Voldemort!" he shouted, laughing madly, "This is the end for you!"

"WHAT IS THIS MAGIC? WHO ARE YOU?"Voldemort screeched, finally slowing the inexorable advance of the magical beads. "I WILL FIND OUT WHO YOU ARE! LEGILIMENS!"

And that was when Voldemort's overwhelming magical mind probe slammed into the Phoenix's Occlumency barriers, tearing them to pieces in the strain and stress of the moment.

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Rage. Burning, all-encompassing anger and utter hatred of the man standing before him. He knew what was happening, he knew what to do.

He knew how to kill the sorcerer fighting him. He knew he was stronger.

He would succeed this time. He, Harry Potter, would strike down the man before him and watch as his corpse burned and writhed in its death throes. Then he would revel in cathartic ecstasy, finally fulfilling the prophecy and breaking the deadlock of inevitable destiny.

He would win.

Sparks danced in Voldemort's vision as he felt an Occlumency barrier slamming into place, but he had seen enough.

Harry. Potter.

The Phoenix was Harry Potter.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

When Harry had first had some moments to himself after Voldemort's rebirth, he had prepared for the eventuality of his Phoenix identity being compromised, his plan B. The plan was fairly audacious, involved a lot of rapid assassination and widespread displays of power, and hopefully would send Voldemort spinning into an early grave, but would probably fall apart within a day of it being implemented. Plans tended to work like that.

Of course, that all rested on whether he could escape the dangerous magical feedback loop locking the two wands in place, and causing crackling bolts of energy to ripple across the outside of the golden cage of light. Last time nothing but a small burst of energy had happened when he had broken the link. This time he wasn't so sure he would be as lucky.

Voldemort's magical probe whipped from his mind, ending the piercing pain of the search, restoring Harry's vision and sending his emotions roaring back in a tidal wave of fury. Instantly the beads of light shot in Voldemort's direction, almost sinking into the Dark Lord's wand. Voldemort's face was contorted in a mixture of anger and what looked like genuine fear. He looked like Harry remembered him in the previous timeline – gaunt, white and stiff, like dead skin stretched over a lanky spider-like frame. Voldemort's face shone a sickly yellow in the light of the dome as he opened his mouth slightly.

“...Potter?” he whispered, before the beads sank into his wand in his moment of lapse, and Hogsmeade shattered in a whirlwind of lightning and fire, with the very air itself ignited in fury.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

“Dumbledore! What in Merlin's name is happening to Hogsmeade?” Scrimgeour shouted over the haunting Phoenix song.

“Death Eaters have attacked the town, Rufus.” Dumbledore said gravely, gesturing at one of the remaining half-formed Dark Marks,

which was slowly being broken up by javelins of golden light issuing from the dome in the distance.

“Fudge said you’d say something like that, but I have to say I agree with you here, Dumbledore. Those aren’t copycat killers. They’re too organised. I saw the scrying screen before I left the Ministry, there must have been eighty of them Apparating in.”

“Indeed. I should also tell you that the man you’ve been hunting, the Phoenix-“ Dumbledore was cut off by an ear-splitting high-pitched keening, which precluded the complete destruction of Hogsmeade village. The several dozen people arrayed across the hill by the station snapped to look at the village, several hundred metres away. The golden dome had burst into a searing blood red inferno, illuminating the dark afternoon sky with tongues of fire. Hogsmeade itself seemed to have had a neat section of it simply scooped out by the magical hemisphere, while the igniting of the dome had sent a pulse of devastating force through the rest of the village.

The remaining erect buildings – Dervish & Banges, Zonko’s, part of Honeydukes and Madame Puddifoots among them – teetered dangerously, then collapsed in on themselves, sending a hot wave of dust and ash billowing outwards from the epicentre. Dumbledore, the Order members and the Aurors all cast bubble-head charms simultaneously as the cloud of hot soot and dust hit them, obscuring their vision. When the dirty air cleared, all that was left was a wasted mass of rubble and debris, as though a Muggle bomb had directly hit the main road running through the village. Dominating the scene was a crimson firestorm roughly resembling the Priori Incantatem dome, twice as tall as a house and as wide as the main street. The Phoenix song had stopped.

“Shit.” Scrimgeour said succinctly.

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Harry found himself face down on a burning hot cobblestone road as he was jerked unpleasantly back into consciousness. He cracked open his eyes, and saw that the light shining onto his cut and bruised

hands and the blackened floor had turned a deep red. He screwed his eyes shut, groaned, spat out blood, and rolled onto his back, feeling like he had been hit by the Knight Bus. All he could do for several seconds was breathe, coughing on the dust-laden filthy air. He felt as though he was in hell; it was incredibly hot wherever he had landed. He could feel blood oozing from a cut on his forehead, as a drop of it began to roll down towards his eyebrow he took action.

He fumbled for his potions pouch and thankfully found it intact in his pocket, managing to down a potent mixture designed to get him back on his feet fast, despite the potentially volatile nature of the ingredients. Energy flooded his veins and he jerked himself up and onto his feet, before finally opening his eyes, and almost immediately shutting them again because of the dusty air.

He cast a small protective charm on his eyes and throat before opening them again. He could barely remember what had happened; only that things were severely fucked up. Voldemort knew who he was, a lot of people were dead, and it seemed that Hogsmeade had turned into hell on earth.

All around him was on fire. He could see a barrier, arcing over his head and encircling what remained of the cobbled main street and some miscellaneous debris running alongside, a short distance ahead of him. It was a undulating wall of incandescence, which was as hypnotic as the (slightly scuffed) decorative flames licking at the hem of Harry's robes. He carefully reapplied his cooling charms, feeling sweat sticking his transfigured outfit to his chest and back, and pulled his hood down to let air get to his head.

Bodies were still everywhere, some charred to a crisp, some obviously hit by the spells Harry and Voldemort had used when they were fighting. He could see a number of student's corpses, but no one he immediately recognised. He shook his head, feeling woozy from the explosion, and noticed a spark of green light along the main street, illuminating the thick dust hanging in the air which he had initially choked on. His sluggish mind processed that it was a Killing Curse a fraction of a second after his reflexes did, and he flung himself to the side as it whizzed past him.

So Voldemort had survived.

[illegible]

He was going to slaughter the boy.

Cut off his legs and stamp on his throat, rip out his eyes and feed them to him, bend his arms backwards and break them before healing them and doing it again. He'd feel what the death Voldemort himself had experienced 13 years before had felt like. He would make him feel a suffering that would have him begging for death long before the end was in sight.

Potter would pay.

He had no idea how the boy had got so strong, and he was frankly frightened about it. The last time he had felt fear was when he was a boy discovering the strange powers he had had over others, and that had given way to arrogance in short order.

Of course, he would have nothing to worry about if he killed the upstart before this got out of hand.

Voldemort followed up his Avada Kedavra with a series of wide cutting curses, aiming at the dark shadow he could see in the red dust ahead. The crimson light made it hard to see, as the sun on the other side of the wall of fire was obscured and diffused. His teeth were bared, his hair was matted with sweat and dirt, and his robes were ruined, despite still doing the job of turning away curses that could potentially kill him. The Dark Lord was a mess.

He tracked the dark shape through the thick foggy grime, keeping low and firing off curses intermittently before running to one side to avoid being pinned down by Potter. He was enclosed in a small arena with the boy, he would pin him into a corner eventually. He stumbled over a faceless corpse, charred and broken by the Priori Incantatem explosion, and lost track of Potter in his moment of distraction.

Cursing, Voldemort whirled around, looking in all directions through the thick clouds obscuring his vision for a moving shape in the distance. Finally, he spotted one. He snapped. With a growing roar, he ran across the road, breaking the otherwise silent landscape with a series of bellowed curses, causing the shadow to buck and collapse as it was struck with a hail of blazing curses and spells.

He had managed to finally down his unaware opponent. As he prepared to approach the corpse and check Potter was actually dead, a man slammed into his side, knocking the wind out of the Dark Lord and sending him into the hard ground. He saw stars as his head hit the ground, and winced in pain as he felt a fist drive into his side, and then his cheek, before finally wrenching his wand hand to one side and pinning it. Looking up blearily, Voldemort saw a man get to his feet, silhouetted against the red fiery sky above, a booted foot grinding his wand hand into the ground.

“Like I said, Tom, you can’t tell the difference between a construct and the real thing. Avada Kedavra.”

Before the green light of rushing death hit him in the face, Voldemort managed to wheeze out one word, his mind reeling in shock from the suddenness of his defeat.

“Morsmordre.”

He felt a tugging sensation somewhere around his midriff, and vanished as the Killing Curse blew up the burnt street where he once was.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Dumbledore was the only one brave enough to approach the maelstrom, despite the excuses spouted by the Aurors. He was standing scant feet from the wall of fire, protected by potent cooling charms and protection charms on his sinuses, throat and eyes to ward off the dust. Hogsmeade had been locked down and all available Ministry personnel had been called to the area to assist. As Dumbledore stood, alone, he heard the bustle and chatter of the

Ministry workers over the roar of the magic as they set up a perimeter of wards and sent delegates up to the castle to ensure everyone was ok.

Finally he heard a slight ringing coming from the conflagration, and felt the prickly heat lessen as a bulge developed in the fire. After a second or two a burning figure erupted from the swelling, collapsing face first on the ground and rolling frantically to put the flames out as Dumbledore knelt and pushed the man onto his back.

It was Harry, and he looked in a bad shape. His hood and cloak were badly charred, and Dumbledore could see his throat and eyes were inflamed despite charms put on them – the dust must have been thicker inside the dome. Multiple bruises and small cuts coated his body, and he was breathing rapidly, but nothing was life-threatening. As he examined Harry, the Priori Incantatem bubble began to shrink and fade, the sound of crackling fire fading from earshot.

“Headmaster... he knows... he knows who I am...” Harry gasped, grabbing Dumbledore’s arm suddenly. “Please, Headmaster... I need to get out of here, Ron and Hermione need to get out of here, their families are in danger... Sirius is in danger, the Order is in danger... we need to do something...”

“Harry, my boy, at this present time I only two things to say to you. The first is that the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix are located at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. The second is dolor,” he whispered softly, gently removing Harry’s grip on his arm as the boy fell into a deep slumber. Checking over his shoulder and noticing Ministry personnel rapidly approaching, Dumbledore hurriedly turned Harry’s right glove into a Portkey, sending him spiralling away towards a secure room in Grimmauld place. He would send Snape in to tend to his wounds later – the man was a capable healer, and he was sure Voldemort would not summon Snape until he had had a chance to regroup. He would have to move fast, as the political, economic and social fallout from this attack was going to be unbelievable. Fudge was gone for sure.

“Dumbledore!” Scrimgeour said, reaching the point where the magical dome once was. “What did you do?”

“Dumbledore... what... what happened to me? I feel awful,” Harry said, his voice hoarse and dry.

“Harry... that is an exceedingly long story,” Dumbledore signed wearily, before summoning the chair by the window over to where he was, and sitting down in it next to the head of Harry’s bed, where he was propped up on pillows. “Harry, everything has changed. When you came back from the future you experienced, you found you could predict events to a reasonable accuracy by comparing them to your knowledge. Now I fear that is going to become a lot more difficult.

Hogsmeade is gone. There were several dozen deaths, several of them Hogwarts students, an untold amount of Galleons worth of damage and the total destruction of all but two standing buildings in the village. Only the station and the Shrieking Shack were saved – I’ve moved Sirius into this house until further notice.

Voldemort has also uncovered your identity, according to you. Professor Snape was called to his side almost immediately; I had not foreseen this. He says the Dark Lord is beyond furious, but neglected to punish his remaining Death Eaters, instead forcing them to win the Dementors to his cause and then break into Azkaban, wherein he will force the inmates onto his side and reclaim his most valuable supporters. Voldemort has also moved into a stage of total warfare – most of his Death Eaters have now been forced to break their cover and join his side at the Riddle House or wherever he has chosen to base himself.

The Ministry is in chaos. Fudge has been immediately ousted through pressure from Amelia Bones, Rufus Scrimgeour and myself. He cannot be allowed to continue governing Magical Britain when his priority was to incriminate me rather than address the situation of Lord Voldemort attacking our only fully magical settlement. He is currently under informal house arrest by the Order. Umbridge has also been sacked. Rufus Scrimgeour is now the Minister for Magic, and is coming round to the idea that the Phoenix is on his side, however I’m sure you have plans in this area.

And thus stands the situation, after one rather hectic night. I had to conduct more than one Time-Turner extended meeting with the various people involved. You, however, are probably the most important person in all of this, even if they don't know it."

"... Bugger," Harry said finally, after a long pause. "That happened sodding fast. I remember the battle... that was intense. Voldemort is stronger than he was before – he knows some new tricks as well. Some of the students were turned into Inferi, I only just managed to beat them back."

"I saw, I saw," Dumbledore said quietly, and Harry saw his eyes water as the venerable Headmaster bowed his head.

"Headmaster... I think I know how we need to move from here. The Order... the Order isn't very strong, to be frank. We have several competent fighters, but only you, some of the Aurors and I are worth a damn in any sort of high-level conflict. Voldemort has moved into total warfare, we need the Ministry and the Order to do the same."

"Harry, my boy, are you saying that you want to take a direct hand in all of this?"

"Well... it is the Order of the Phoenix, is it not? I don't particularly want to crash your party, Dumbledore, but I've been in a Wizarding war, as have you. But you left it too late last time, Voldemort nearly won. I know what has to be done; I did it alone for years."

Dumbledore sighed and rubbed his eyes gently. "Harry... I'll arrange a full Order meeting for you. As it stands Snape, myself, Sirius and Remus know your identity, and we have all the Horcruxes bar one, as Voldemort is unable to make more Horcruxes at present – the demon who created his body may not be aware of the current set he has, but if he splits his soul again there will be hell to pay, if you'll pardon the pun."

"We have the advantage, Dumbledore. We just need to exploit it and put an end to this."

Dumbledore nodded gravely, getting up from the chair and turning to leave the room. "At present everyone thinks you've been kidnapped, the public fears the worst. Ron and Hermione are particularly upset, but I have put them and their families under enhanced security regardless of this. I will introduce you to the Order this afternoon, I would make sure you know what you're going to say. We have no time to lose."

Harry closed his eyes and sighed heavily as Dumbledore left. He was beginning to limber up – whoever had healed him (Snape? Dumbledore had said he knew about his alter-ego...) had done an excellent job. As he got out of the majestic four-poster and got himself dressed, Harry's mind began to whirl into action. The Order needed to be marshalled into a force to rival the Death Eaters and whatever allies they had. As Dumbledore had said, they had no time to lose.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Earlier...

In the dark private chambers of the Riddle House, a cold circular stone room containing little decoration apart from a meticulously organised work desk and an overstuffed bookcase, a figure appeared from nowhere several feet off of the floor.

Lord Voldemort fell to the ground with a crunch, hissing in pain as he felt his right wrist break underneath him and the throbbing pain in his side and face fail to recede. Inside he could barely think, he was so indescribably angry words simply failed him for several minutes as he lay awkwardly on the flagstone floor, eyes screwed shut and his hair covering his face.

Eventually his sore left hand gripped his wand and he cast several healing spells on himself, restoring his body to perfect working order. He got to his feet slowly, before finally letting loose a howl of impotent rage and punching the floor in fury, shattering half the flagstones in the room. He strode from his chambers in a blind rage, heading for the Death Eater's quarters. He found no one inhabiting the corridors

of the finely-decorated mansion, pausing only to viciously decapitate a sneering statue of one of his ancestors, and eventually reached the room he was looking for.

He threw open the door with a bang, to reveal scores of Death Eaters, some unconscious, some dead, but most either tending their wounds or arguing with each other in a long room dominated by a dining table reminiscent of the ones at Hogwarts. As the Dark Lord entered the room, everything went completely silent. Voldemort saw his inner circle standing to one side, conversing hurriedly with Severus Snape, who had been their spy in the castle during the whole debacle.

Voldemort surveyed the men standing before him for thirty silent seconds before speaking. "I," he hissed, "want a full and complete report of casualties, events, and enemy casualties from today delivered to me before this time tomorrow. I want to see the fortress of Azkaban broken and splintered, with every person faithful to our cause freed. Kill everyone else. I also want to see anyone the boy Harry Potter ever loved or felt feelings for tortured and killed as publically as possible. If this is not done, I will not hesitate to kill anyone who fails me. Do not forget who gives you the power you enjoy."

He then strode from the room, which was practically electric with communal fear, and returned to his quarters.

Potter.

Potter was the Phoenix.

The Dark Lord sat down at his working desk, and began to think about what to do next.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

"Friends... You have heard about the tragedy that befell Hogsmeade. I will tell you now, Voldemort and his Death Eaters attacked the village and committed the foul murders there – Aurors and children

alike were among the dead. But what most of you do not know is what happened after the Aurors were forced to retreat.”

Dumbledore looked solemn as he addressed the assembled Order of the Phoenix in the dining room of Grimmauld Place – everyone from Sirius (having been vouched for by Dumbledore, which was good enough for everyone) to Mundungus was standing in the slightly cramped room, the table having been removed. The Order numbered several dozen people from all walks of life – from Tonks with her epilepsy-inducing hairstyles to Tobias Grisham, a small human clerk from Gringotts who could monitor Death Eater finances to a certain extent. Dumbledore, dressed in a muted dark green set of robes, a far cry from his usual flamboyancy, gestured to a small door to his right.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I present you with your saviour.”

The door opened a crack, then fully, to reveal the striking figure of the Phoenix. He was clad in his easily-recognisable dark red outfit, with the stylised flames and peaked hood, and his face was hidden in impenetrable shadow. Everyone in the congregation gasped in shock, some going for their wands, but they were calmed by Dumbledore. Mad-Eye-Moody looked particularly horrified, but Dumbledore shot him a stern warning glance – he hadn’t foreseen that Mad-Eye would be able to see Harry underneath the transfigured hood.

The Phoenix strode to stand beside Dumbledore, before nodding silently and addressing the Order in a brisk, confident tone, launching straight into his rhetoric before anyone had a chance to react.

“My name is the Phoenix. I fought the Dark Lord yesterday in the centre of Hogsmeade. I killed most of his honour guard and beat him to the ground before he escaped. Our power created the gold dome; our power destroyed the village. I can best him in a duel. Before I continue, can any of you say the same?”

The room was silent, most of the attendant members gaping stupidly or looking warily at Dumbledore while Harry continued for as long as he could before interruption.

“I thought not. You should know that from this moment on the Wizarding World is at war,” the Phoenix began to pace up and down, his arms behind his back, “and only two organisations stand in Voldemort’s path – the DMLE and you. Voldemort does not forgive, he does not have mercy, and neither do his followers. He will break Azkaban open and take back his most fanatical followers while drawing the Dementors to his side. He will recruit werewolves to slaughter men and women with impunity. He will march on the Ministry itself – corrupt and inefficient as it is. The Goblins will not help us; they will simply lock the doors of their bank and hide behind their enchantments. The giants will not lend their aid to either side, and the vampires are refusing to even meet with us.”

“What the hell is your point?” spat Hestia Jones, looking at the Phoenix with vehemence. “Why are you telling us this?”

“Because I’m trying to impress upon you the fact that unless we act now, we are all going to die,” said Harry calmly.

“If you’re so great, why don’t you do something about it?” said a voice from the crowd – Harry couldn’t make it out.

“I never said I wouldn’t. But I need you all to follow under my command for this to work. I need to ask some of you to take lives, get information through any means and to stand and fight when the time comes. Can you do that?”

There was uproar in the dining room as the various Order members tried to shout their displeasure at either the Phoenix or Dumbledore – only Remus, Sirius, McGonagall and Moody remained silent. After several seconds listening to massed accusations of madness, foolishness and illegality, Harry lifted his wand and caused an almighty boom to erupt from the end, causing the assembled Order to fall silent.

“This is laughable. You’re supposed to be the last bastion of defence against the darkness, yet you can’t even come to a consensus when someone tries to lead you? You are all probably going to have to do something you don’t agree with before this is over. This is war; you will have to do as you are ordered. Voldemort breaks his minions

through pain and fear, all I ask for is your loyalty, the same loyalty you show him,” the Phoenix said, indicating Dumbledore, who was looking sternly at the crowd. “Do you want to save your loved ones? Your children, your spouses, your friends? Do you want to see the Death Eaters spread their racist dogma over the British Isles? The international community is refusing to help us. We will have to help ourselves. Why did you join this organisation in the first place, if not to do what is necessary? The one who saved you all before, Harry Potter, has been taken to Merlin knows where by Voldemort, won’t you even try to save a thirteen year old boy?”

There was dead silence as the Order stared at the Phoenix. No-one seemed to know what to say – some looked scared, some inspired, some wary. Finally, Sirius spoke calmly from his position at the front of the crowd, a smile on his face.

“I’ll follow you.”

Next Tonks spoke, looking unsure but speaking confidently. “I’ll help you if you want me to.”

A couple more people piped up with their pledges to help. Harry grinned underneath his bandana as Mad-Eye nodded at him and winked while the people next to him offered their allegiance. Finally, after the hubbub died down he heard a small, silky voice from the back of the crowd.

“I’ll do what I can.”

Heads turned to see Snape, looking wan but holding himself confidently. Harry nodded from under his hood and Snape returned the gesture, before leaving the room silently.

“Well,” Dumbledore said softly, “the Phoenix will contact several of you after this meeting to issue you with responsibilities, but for now this meeting is adjourned. I will take any further questions in private if needs be.”

He nodded at Harry, who nodded back smartly and walked calmly out of the door, grinning slightly at the eruption of noise as everyone tried to request a meeting with Dumbledore.

Now all that remained was to see what Voldemort was going to do now.

If anyone thinks Harry was being arrogant or unrealistic in this chapter, remember that it was largely for effect to get the Order into shape!

Chapter 17 – One Man Army, Part One

It had been five days since the conflict at Hogsmeade had pushed the Wizarding World unceremoniously into a war footing. The newspapers bore headlines which screamed casualty figures and detailed the political manoeuvring that had gone on in the days following the attack, as well as speculation on the disappearance of The Boy Who Lived. Fear stalked the streets, yet nothing more had happened apart from the abrupt disappearance of several members of high society, including Lucius Malfoy, presumably to escape the growing conflict. Those who weren't entirely stupid realised the truth; Voldemort was mustering his forces.

But Bellatrix Lestrange had no idea any of this had happened, aside from the fact that the Aurors had increased security (otherwise known as moving more Dementors there) around her cell. Not that she particularly realised this fact, being trapped in the living hell of her own mind. All she experienced was the crushing sense of failing her master and experiencing his eternal disappointment. Grey fog was all she saw, cruel words of reprimand were all she heard.

The Dementors effected even the most powerful of Voldemort's servants in the end.

She lay on her back in her sparsely furnished stone cell, oblivious of the dirt and grime coating her wasted body as she moaned repeatedly to an invisible master about how sorry she was. Unseeing eyes rolled in her skull as the Dementors' power filled her body with despair day in and day out.

That was, of course, until a muffled explosion in the bowels of the prison signalled the arrival of Voldemort's forces, and the defection of the darkest creatures in the Wizarding World, the Dementors.

Bellatrix rolled lethargically onto her front as the Dementors' grip on her sanity receded, and crawled pathetically to the wards on her cell door, looking out into the grubby stone corridor beyond, where the Dementors were gliding swiftly away from the cells. As her mind began to slowly clear, she heard the unmistakable sounds of violence and rushing death associated with the Killing Curse, before finally a

dark figure ascended the steps of the high security section of Azkaban. Bellatrix struggled to focus on the man, an aristocratic gentleman with long hair and handsome features, before finally giving up on the entire situation and passing out.

“Secure the prisoners,” Voldemort ordered, “the Order of the Phoenix will be here before long, despite our distraction. I want no mistakes in this.”

[illegible]

Outside the prison, on the gravelly spit of land that passed as a landing point for prison ships on the island, a pair of Death Eaters stood watch while their master's forces stormed the island. They could see the Dementors, damnable creatures, standing sentinel a short distance away over the ocean, but thankfully the monsters had reined in their negative effects. The guards were bored out of their minds, truth be told, and really wanted to be inside the fortress relieving some of the frustration that had built up lazing around at the master's mansion, but Voldemort was not a man you refused. So guard duty it was.

That was, of course, until there was a sharp crack of Apparition and a figure appeared on the beach before them, gravel crunching as his feet touched the ground. He was garbed in a long red cloak with a peaked hood and dancing flames around the hem, leather boots and gloves, and a bandana which masked his features in the shadows of his hood. He was currently the second most feared man in Wizarding Britain. Ominously, blood caked his cloak and hands, and he appeared to be giving off no little amount of heat in what could only be described as sheer rage.

He was the Phoenix.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he growled. "Did I miss the party?"

[illegible]

Three days before the breakout...

Rufus Scrimgeour was sitting at his new desk in the Minister's office, working feverishly at a pile of Auror reform acts he wanted to rush through. It was only his second day in office, and he had had approximately four hours sleep in that time, yet he felt fresh as when he had first sat down on his desk. You didn't become head of the Auror corps through needing lots of sleep.

He hated his new office. It was sterile and isolated from the people he was supposed to be leading. The walls were stuffed with depressingly boring papers, the desk was too elaborate for his liking and the less said about the colour scheme the better. But it was what he had to work with, and work was all Scrimgeour seemed to be doing. Hogsmeade was gone, lots of people had died, and he didn't really know what to do. His mind told him to do damage control and make out everything was fine, but Dumbledore had seemed oddly insistent that that was what he did not do.

Maybe it was time the Wizarding World wasn't patronised or the situation wasn't sugar-coated. He knew He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named could kill every Auror in his force with horrifying ease, and that only Dumbledore could take him on in single combat and have a hope of winning. And, not to put too fine a point on it, Dumbledore was old.

That was, of course, unless this Phoenix gentleman would lend a hand. Scrimgeour had been eager to meet him since the Hogsmeade incident, but so far he had yet to show, despite Dumbledore promising he would do his best to arrange some form of meeting. Of course, official policy was to arrest and interrogate the vigilante known as "The Phoenix" on sight, but again Rufus was not the boss because he followed the rules.

He crossed out a line about Aurors needing to follow all Ministry pre-war guidelines – that'd soften the legislation up for when he authorised the Unforgivables later – when he felt the air in his office suddenly begin to buzz faintly. Quicker than lightning, he grabbed his wand and jumped out of his chair, upending the large wooden piece of furniture and crouching behind it defensively as the buzzing turned into a dull roar in his ears, and the papers on his desk began to flutter.

Finally there was the sharp crack of Apparition, and a figure appeared in front of Scrimgeour's desk.

The Minister of Magic immediately blindly fired off a trio of stunners, following up with a vicious strangling jinx and a blinding hex, before the assailant spoke.

"Minister! I've just come to talk to you, stop attacking me!" the man shouted, his red defensive shield absorbing the curses effortlessly. Scrimgeour poked his head over his chair and saw the Phoenix, looking rather surprised, standing in front of his desk.

"How the hell did you break through the wards on this office?" Scrimgeour ordered, lowering his wand and lifting his chair up, not taking his eyes off of the Phoenix.

"I've had some... experience with Apparating through wards such as these without alerting security, I wouldn't be worried about anyone being able to duplicate such a feat." The Phoenix replied, transfiguring an empty glass on Scrimgeour's desk into a functional wooden chair and sitting himself down, adjusting his hood to cover his face more as he did so. "I understand you wanted to speak to me."

"Indeed I did," Scrimgeour replied, settling himself back down into his Minister's chair, keeping a grip on his wand. "I need to know what happened in Hogsmeade, and I need to know what you're planning to do during this war. Can I trust you or will I need to contend with you too?"

"Minister, if there's one thing you can count on during this fight, it's my support, I assure you. As to what happened in Hogsmeade... I helped fight the Death Eaters, and fought Voldemort –" Scrimgeour's eyes tightened, but to his credit he did not flinch – "in a duel in the street. During the fight some Fiendfyre got out of control and burned the place down, and then some spells went awry to make that dome you no doubt saw. After that I managed to get the upper hand and he fled, but I have a fairly good idea of his next move."

Scrimgeour sat in silence, stroking his mane-like beard in thought. "His next move... would this be Azkaban? His grunt army didn't do so well, he probably wants his hardened supporters now. The real fanatics."

"Correct," the Phoenix replied. "Now, we have several options here. We could simply kill all the inhabitants of the prison, but that would lose us the advantage of being able to accurately predict his move, and he would want the Dementors anyway. I think the prison is essentially a lost cause. The Dementors will defect and all we'll gain is lost lives if we try any meaningful defence. Pull out as much of the Auror guard as you can without arousing suspicion, and fit the rest with Portkeys to avoid the attack."

"Abandon the prison? But Voldemort will get his supporters!"

"Hear me out. While you're doing this, we need to secure the Ministry as far as possible. Round up the Aurors; check all of them for Dark Marks and do a Veritaserum test. Once you've secured their loyalty, do the same for the entire Ministry with no warning. If you find any moles, interrogate them with Veritaserum and then kill them. Do the same for any prisoners captured during this war; find out what they know, and then dispose of them. We can't have any loose ends or potential breakout targets. This way he may get his fanatical supporters, but we wipe out his spies."

"Kill them? I'm no sympathiser, but that goes against the grain somewhat. If they're PoWs there's a code of honour when it comes to these things..."

"Don't you get it?" the Phoenix interrupted. "If you were captured you'd be tortured, interrogated and then either killed or worse, left alive for Voldemort. We can't give an inch. This war isn't going to be pretty or make us look good, but winning is what is needed. Once you've purified the Auror ranks, authorise the use of Unforgivables and encourage them to be more... forceful with subduing opponents than simple stunners."

"Maiming them, you mean." Scrimgeour replied, stony faced. "I don't particularly like the methods you're suggesting, Phoenix. However..."

he sighed and his face sagged. "I know it's what's needed. What is it that Dumbledore says? We have to choose between what is right and what is easy? Trying to keep everything fair and make us look golden would be easy. We have to win..."

"At all costs, even our image as the 'good guys'. Let's face it, Minister. The Wizarding World is largely ignorant and content to muddle along as long as they aren't disturbed. It's hardly surprising that scum like Malfoy are able to get into power, no one gives enough of a damn to stop him as long as they get their palms greased!"

"Something I've thought about almost daily when I saw Fudge getting chummy with him..." Scrimgeour said darkly. "Look, Phoenix, I think if Dumbledore vouches for you, that's good enough for me, and we seem to be thinking along the same lines. I'll try to do what you've suggested, and start a form of public information column in the Prophet to get news out. Self defence, how to spot Death Eaters and Inferi, that sort of thing. We have to keep the people calm and make it look like we're doing something."

"Make sure you're actually doing something, rather than looking like it," the Phoenix said sharply. "Image isn't important in this kind of situation." He got to his feet, and turned the chair back into a cup. "If you'll excuse me, Minister Scrimgeour, this has been most enlightening. I look forward to reading the column of yours when it is introduced." He nodded sharply and Apparated away, leaving Scrimgeour to rub his eyes and summon Amelia Bones. No time like the present to check the Auror battalions.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom wasn't quite as busy as Scrimgeour, but had his fair share of trouble on his plate. Cabinet discontent, problems abroad, and some sort of civil war brewing in the Wizard's society were all weighing down on his mind as he scratched out a letter to his foreign minister. His work was interrupted, however, by a sharp crack, like that of a whip, and a hooded figure appearing in front of his desk.

The man, who had given the Prime Minister such a shock as to cause him to break his pen and swear violently, was a moderately tall fellow in a deep red cloak, which looked like it was on fire, complete with a stylised hood and bandana to obscure his features. In his hand he held a wooden stick, which the PM knew to be a wand used by the Wizards to perform their sorcery.

“Good evening, Prime Minister. I’m known as the Phoenix, and I’m here to discuss with you the problems currently arising in the Wizarding World.”

The Prime Minister sat in his chair for a moment; before his hand slowly began to move beneath it to the panic button installed on the underside, sweat beading on the back of his neck. “I... see. Do you often teleport unannounced into the offices of heads of states?”

“Desperate circumstances call for desperate measures. Minister Scrimgeour, a man I’m sure you’ll have met very recently, will vouch for me if you want to contact him. Otherwise, I just want to talk.” The Phoenix gently placed his wand on the Prime Minister’s desk, and there was a very long beat before the Prime Minister’s hand came back into view from below the desk.

“You have five minutes,” he said curtly, before gingerly taking the wand and placing it next to him on the desk.

Harry immediately launched into a brief outline of the Wizarding World where it stood, the Prime Minister, nodding sharply as he went. As he rounded off with a brief description of the measures the Ministry was going to take, the Prime Minister interrupted.

“This is all good and well, but how does it affect me and the people of Britain?”

“As I’ve said, Voldemort is a vicious racist who considers all non-magical folk to be no less than vermin. He intends to, in a nutshell, kill everyone on this island who cannot perform magic, and then move on from there to kill everyone he considers impure.”

“So just the standard genocide plan then. And what if you fail to stop this man?” the Prime Minister said bitingly, his eyes boring into the Phoenix’s from behind his owl-like glasses.

The Phoenix seemed to pause for a moment, and that was all the Prime Minister needed. “So you mean to say, Mr... Phoenix, that your world has produced this sick madman who wants nothing less than total subjugation of the country I and my party have been elected to govern, and you have no contingency plans in the event that you and your law enforcement fail to stop him? I think you need to listen to me now. We know where your Ministry lies, directly under our capital, and we have a good idea as to where the entrances are. Should anything happen, I won’t hesitate to have that, and that shopping complex you’ve disguised as a condemned building site, totally destroyed.”

“What? You can’t be serious, Prime Minister! Innocents would die!”

“From what you’ve just told me they’d be dead anyway. I’d rather gain a definitive strategic advantage from the off than wait for this man to do whatever magic you people do. I will not be questioned on this. You claim you’re the good guys and can stop him. You’d better live up to your promises. For all our sakes.” The Prime Minister then pushed Harry’s wand towards him and stood up, extending his hand.

“Despite this, we shouldn’t stand apart in this. I understand the magnitude of this kind of conflict, the Falklands would be small fry compared to what might happen if this gets out of hand. I’ve seen some of what you wizards can do, and frankly it scares me. I’ll do what I can to help, if you require it.” The Phoenix also extended his hand and they shook. “So just make sure you win.”

The Phoenix paused and picked up his wand before nodding respectfully at the Prime Minister. “I’ll do my best, you can certainly believe that. But don’t expect this to be completely bloodless on your part.”

“War never is.”

“Tell me about it,” the Phoenix said, before Apparating away with another crack.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

One day before the breakout...

“I have reports for you, Harry,” Dumbledore said as he entered the study in Grimmauld Place, the wards on the doors humming merrily as they identified him as permitted to access the Phoenix’s chambers. “And I’ve brought Mad-Eye to meet you, after he saw through your illusion at the meeting. He assures me he’s kept his mouth shut, but has been rather adamant about meeting you.”

Harry looked up from the plans he was writing, mainly centred around countering Death Eater raids, and took the sheaf of papers from Dumbledore. “Let him in then, you know how the wards work. I think I can do this alone, Headmaster. Thanks for the reports; I’ll give you more orders to pass on later. Send my regards to Snape for the extra potions and information regarding Azkaban,”

“Certainly, Harry.” Dumbledore said amicably, patting him on the shoulder before leaving the study (in fact the bedroom Harry first woke up in after Hogsmeade converted into a workroom). After a minute, Mad-Eye-Moody stumped into the room, looking grim (although to be fair, for him looking happy was actually quite the achievement) and holding his wand tight, his electric blue magical eye roving around the room.

“So... are you really Potter? Polyjuice? A second glamour?” Moody barked, aiming his wand at Harry, who was sitting in a swivel chair by the oak desk, which was piled high with miscellaneous scraps of paper.

“Close, but no cigar, Mad-Eye. Time travel is more along the right lines.”

Moody paused for a minute, before breaking into an ugly grin. “Time travel?”

"You play up that limp because it makes you look weak. At a voice command only you know it changes to become an advanced magical limb which is in many ways superior to a normal leg. You killed Rosier with it by caving his chest in. Does that change your mind?"

Moody's grin turned into a look of shock. "No one saw me fight Rosier, how would you know about my leg?"

"Like I said, time travel. Not exactly inconceivable in a world where you can grow an extra arm by saying some words, really. You told me that story once upon a time."

Moody lowered his wand and let out a bark of laughter. "You're good, Potter. You remind me of your father. Time travel... I'll have to ask Albus about that one, but it explains a lot, I'll give you that. What about the sudden growth?"

"Magical overload caused by excessive duelling led to my body growing to contain the energy. It was either that or exploding, according to Dumbledore."

"Aye, that can happen. Saw a little kid shoot up four inches after he spontaneously banished a fallen tree off of his father once, just took too much out of him and the build-up would have killed him otherwise. Not common, but not unheard of. I approve of what you're doing, by the way. Constant-"

"Vigilance." Harry finished with a smile, and Moody grinned again.

"Aye. I like what you've done with the Order. Not so sure about the costume though, but you're young. At least your underwear isn't on the outside, like some of those Muggle comics I saw the Weasley kids reading. But, if you'll excuse me, I'll have to go talk to Albus and get him to clear up a few things. We'll talk later."

Harry grinned and Moody nodded his goodbyes before heading out of the room with his affected limp. Harry shook his head, still smiling, and returned to the plans he was working on. Someone had to do the paperwork, after all.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

The morning of the breakout...

Harry tended to start his morning with some training in a disused upstairs room, mainly running on a magical ‘treadmill’ (really an enchanted floor) and some target practice to keep his aim as good as possible, before showering and eating a breakfast prepared by the Hogwarts House Elves (Dumbledore had them feed the Order as Mrs. Weasley wasn’t always there, and got Dobby to deliver the meals under strict orders not to divulge anything).

That particular morning he had got up late, a by-product of a late night of reports, and it was midday before he settled down to actually do some Order work. His work mainly consisted of assigning information gathering tasks, with the help of Dumbledore, to the Order members and keeping abreast of the Wizarding world’s situation. Scrimgeour, to his approval, had started his column that very morning, detailing how to perform a shield charm and do some basic home warding. Harry also noted with amusement that a “Phoenix watch” and a “Potter sightings” pair of sections had been started up in the Prophet, with some typically outlandish claims filling both columns. The Wizarding World was convinced he had been kidnapped in Hogsmeade, as his corpse was not among those found.

It was a nice alibi, he had to admit.

However, while he read through a report on Death Eater sightings around the border control offices, Harry felt a strong vibration in his pocket, accompanied by a flat ringing noise. He immediately stood up, tossing the report aside, and pulled out a small square piece of metal from his pocket, enlarging it with a wave of his hand. On the polished surface of the thin metal tablet bold lettering began to appear.

“AMELIA BONES’ HOUSE UNDER ATTACK – PROBABLE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT. HELP IMMEDIATELY, I AM INVESTIGATING REPORTS OF A DEMENTOR UPRISING – AD”

The tablet, a system Harry had devised only two days before, was something he had charmed with the help of Dumbledore and given one to him and one to Moody as a means of rapid contact. Thankfully it seemed to pass its first test.

Grabbing his wand and shrunken potions pack, Harry glanced at the coordinates that were listed underneath the message, activated his costume and Apparated through the keyed house wards and away to Amelia Bones' residence.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Amelia Bones had been enjoying a cup of tea, a break from the endless reports to the Minister she was writing from her small country home, when her ward alarms had been triggered and a Killing Curse had shot through her kitchen window, completely wrecking her sink and setting off even more alarms, alerting the Ministry and the Order that she was under attack (while she was not strictly an Order member, Dumbledore kept an eye on the Ministry alarm system). Without skipping a beat she set down her tea and transfigured her windows into steel plates, before beating a hasty retreat to the upper floors as spellfire spattered against the barriers she had erected.

Looking out of n upstairs window, the situation looked grim. Eight Death Eaters, among them a silver-masked member of the Inner Circle, were arrayed on her neat lawn, having broken down the gates that marked the entrance into her small walled garden. Her country home, the second one she owned after her London residence, was essentially in the middle of nowhere, a small two story abode with a modest walled-off garden and a nice fountain in the corner, which a Death Eater was having fun smashing to bits as she watched.

She rolled up her sleeves and smashed the window she was looking out of, before firing down a blistering array of spells onto the Death Eaters below, sending the one who had broken the fountain flying off of his feet at a fatal angle and another reeling with a cut shoulder. Shouting orders, the Inner Circle member directed his followers to fire blasting curses at the upper story of the house, causing Amelia to duck back with a curse, masonry pulverising around her.

She sat with her back to the wall, breathing heavily, knowing that something must have happened elsewhere for there to be no support right now. Suddenly, the spellfire that was destroying the walls of her house stopped, to be replaced by stunned shouts from outside.

"It's the Phoenix!" she heard one of the attackers shout. "Kill him!"

[illegible]

Harry landed after his Apparition trip just outside a pleasant looking property, which was marred only by the evil followers of Voldemort currently tearing it apart with magic. The gate lay in a mangled heap, glowing red-hot from the spells that had ripped it off of its hinges. Seven Death Eaters were flinging spells at a top-floor window, while one of them was barely alive on the lawn, his neck at a nasty angle.

Harry pulled his hood down tighter and flexed his fingers, before running at a sprint towards the back of the nearest Death Eater, who failed to notice him. Drawing his fist back, he jumped and left fly with a vicious punch, shouting a blasting curse as he did so, sending the Death Eater sprawling with a broken back, his wand flying from his now-numb fingers as he fell. All the other Death Eater's stopped firing spells and stared dumbly at their fallen friend from behind their expressionless masks, before the Inner Circle member recovered and fired a Killing Curse at Harry, shouting for the others to kill him.

Harry rolled under the Killing Curse, flicking his wand dexterously to produce a blinding flash of light before springing out of the roll to body slam a Death Eater in the stomach and cut his throat with a Sectumsempra curse. Pushing the body away, he fired a Killing Curse at a Death Eater who had recovered his vision, before dropping to the floor to avoid a Cruciatus curse before he could see if his had connected.

“Get him! Kill him!” the Inner Circle member roared, retreating towards the house as his minions fruitlessly attacked Harry, who brutally took them down. He blinded them again with another dazzling flash of light before jumping, magically-assisted, into the air and

causing the ground under him to shake, throwing the already-blind Death Eaters off balance, making them easy prey for several well-placed Killing Curses, which he roared with bestial hatred.

“Effodio!” he hissed, upon landing, blowing a finger-sized hole in another Death Eater’s throat, causing the man’s mask to crack as he fell backwards scrabbling at his ruined neck. The final Death Eater, looking at the Inner Circle member desperately for help, turned to run, only to be viciously cut down by a blasting curse to the back of his head, blowing it apart in a shower of gore and bone and sending him cart wheeling forward across the grass in an almost comical fashion. Ominously, Harry turned to face the last Death Eater, the Inner Circle member, his robes dirtied with the blood of the various Death Eaters he had just killed.

“Are you going to fight me, or are you going to run?” he sneered from beneath his bandana, twirling his wand absent-mindedly as the Inner Circle member faced him down from behind his ornate steel mask.

The only reply he got was an impressively fast electric shock spell to the chest, sending Harry flying backwards with tendrils of lightning snaking across his body as he jerked in pain. He gritted his teeth in anger and rolled once he hit the ground, dodging a follow-up Killing Curse and swiftly getting back onto his feet.

“Good answer,” he said grudgingly, massaging his chest under his burnt robes. The Inner Circle member failed to say anything other than a howl of rage, sending a bright blue spell arcing towards Harry, who parried it with ease and responded by Apparating across the lawn to be right in front of the Inner Circle member, who fell backwards with a cry, dropping his wand in the process.

“Nice try,” Harry said darkly, before stamping on his wand, snapping it in two, and giving the man a brutal kick to the side of the head, splitting his skull under the force of the magically-assisted blow. The Death Eater’s body sagged, blood slowly seeping out from under his mask and through the eyeholes on the grotesque silver covering.

Harry then looked up, seeing Amelia Bones staring with shock out of the window. He raised his arm in a salute, and then turned on his heel to Apparate to Azkaban.

If the breakout was happening, it just wouldn't do to let Voldemort get away with it totally unmolested, would it?

Chapter 18 – One Man Army, Part Two

He raised his arm in a salute, and then turned on his heel to Apparate to Azkaban.

If the breakout was happening, it just wouldn't do to let Voldemort get away with it totally unmolested, would it?

Harry arrived on the grey shores of Azkaban with, unsurprisingly, no resistance from the wards, which he had predicted (hoped, really) would be disabled. Two guards stood, visibly horrified, a short distance away, watching over a small pile of Portkeys and not much else.

"Good evening gentlemen," Harry growled in anger, "Did I miss the party?"

Gaining no immediate response, he swiftly lashed out with his wand, decapitating the pair with a strong Sectumsempra curse and banishing the bodies and heads into the sea along with the Portkeys without a second glance, retaining only one Portkey for study later. He placed the stolen Portkey, an obsidian marble, inside a small transfigured case and pushed it deep into his pocket before turning to crunch up the gravelly beach towards the looming fortress.

He glanced around as he trudged, not seeing much life other than flickers of light inside the prison. Although the island wards were down, Azkaban proper was guarded by far worse ones that Harry couldn't really risk not being disabled, and that was before the obvious risk of Dementors, creatures he hadn't fought properly for years. In the previous timeline Voldemort had disposed of them shortly after his victory, seeing them as a threat to his power.

Only good thing he'd ever done, really.

Harry finally strode off of the beach and onto a rough dirt track, leading between several unmarked graves outside of the dirty perimeter wall of the prison. He kept his eyes out for trouble, not seeing much until he heard a sound that truly put some fear into him.

An unearthly death-rattle, replicated dozens of times, growing into a chilling crescendo.

The Dementors had found him.

He whirled around, the tip of his wand sparking as he looked frantically around for the hideous beasts. He saw nothing other than the grey sea lapping at the shore behind him, but again he heard the rattling breath, and now felt a cold stab of pain in the middle of his chest. Harry gasped and looked up.

Above him was a vortex of cloaks and rotting flesh, a maelstrom of Dementors flowing over one another in a vast swarm. As he looked they all drew breath as one, a horrible rasping roar which nearly lifted Harry off of his feet with the displacement of air.

Instead, he fell to his knees onto the path. The cold pain in his chest had blossomed into something akin to a Cruciatus curse, causing him to howl in pain and clutch at his face as his Occlumency defences were blasted aside by the overwhelming unearthly power of the Dementors.

“YOU FAILED, POTTER!” he heard Voldemort shriek inside his head, and his sight blurred from the disturbed and broken Azkaban soil to morph into Voldemort’s face, his old snake-like one, standing before the ruins of Hogwarts.

Voldemort vanished as another wave of agonising coldness washed over Harry, only to be replaced by Hermione tossing him a Portkey and saying goodbye to him and Ron. After that vision Harry screamed, a primal, visceral sound which practically ripped his throat, and hunched into a ball as the images from his nightmare past continued to torment him. At the edge of his consciousness he felt the rough fabric that made up a Dementor’s cloak brush against the back of his head, but couldn’t do anything about it.

Until a voice popped into his head, the same voice he remembered when he first had the Imperius curse cast onto him.

Cast a spell you idiot, it said calmly, cutting across the horrific roars of the Dementors, the foul smell of their rotting flesh and the unspeakable pain and torment of the visions.

Harry's lips, chapped and cracked now, parted slightly and whispered a spell which somehow transferred to his limp right hand. He had dropped his wand, but the ends of his fingers sparked and flared with a brilliant light which caused the Dementors to recoil as one like a vast cloud, giving Harry the second of respite he needed to clear his head and grab his wand with numb hands. Shaking, he pointed his wand up and thought as hard as he could about standing over Voldemort's burning corpse.

"Mitto Patronum!" he gasped, sending a feeble wisp of silver out of the end of his wand. The Dementors recoiled slightly again, giving him enough time for one last try.

"Mitto Patronum!" he said again, forcing the words out as best he could, and to his relief a dark grey stag burst to life from the end of his wand, hooves sparking with silver as it galloped through mid air straight upwards at terrific speed, drawing the Dementors after it. Harry collapsed backwards as the modified Patronus charm, something he had last used breaking Sirius out of Azkaban, attracted the Dementors like insects to a flame. It continued to gallop upwards as Harry lay on his back in the dirt, panting, the Dementors growing smaller and smaller until they were just a black cloud in the sky. The variant he had used was essentially useless unless there was a lot of room to manoeuvre, as once the Dementors caught up with it they would devour it in seconds and simply come back for more. Harry was aiming to be inside by the time that happened; Voldemort had probably told the Dementors to remain outdoors for fear of compromising his plan.

He got to his feet and promptly vomited onto the dirt, only just managing to move his bandana in time. Gasping and retching, he cast a cleaning charm on himself and rearranged his costume, before downing a small Pepper-Up potion from his pack and advancing up the path once more, slightly faster this time. He was nearly at the prison gates when figures began to Apparate to just inside the walls,

nearly forty Death Eaters in all, with a tall figure at their head, who was standing in front of the open Azkaban gates.

Voldemort.

Harry stopped in his tracks. This was not the situation he had come looking for; he had planned to engage the Death Eaters in smaller groups, hopefully forcing Voldemort to flee before he could spring all his followers. It seemed as though Harry had been too slow, however.

“Ah, The Phoenix!” Voldemort called out mockingly. “Come to stop us, I assume?”

Harry glanced back and saw the Dementors swarming over his Patronus high in the grey sky – they would be on their way back any moment. “Quite confident with a small army behind you, aren’t you Tom?” he shouted back, considering his options carefully.

Voldemort's face twisted into a sneer and he nodded at the Death Eaters, who all raised their wands as one. Harry realised at that moment that Voldemort was not messing around, and that he was going to die if he stood there, so he decided to at least cause some confusion in their ranks before leaving.

“Mitto Patronum!” he shouted, firing another dark grey stag the Death Eaters while picturing Voldemort’s death. As Voldemort looked quizzically at the dark Patronus, Harry heard the sounds of flapping cloaks and deathly howls as the Dementors shot overhead towards the Death Eaters like a ragged flock of crows. With a sarcastic wave, Harry disappeared back into his Grimmauld Place study, as the Dementors descended on Voldemort’s forces in a frenzy.

[illegible]

Albus Dumbledore was pacing in the study of the Minister for Magic, looking extremely worried. In less than one day the Order seemed to have been caught off guard. The Dementors were apparently revolting, Amelia Bones had been attacked, but was thankfully safe now, and now Harry hadn't reported back. Scrimgeour had been

incredibly hard to persuade on the matter of not sending relief to Azkaban, and seeing as even Harry had not returned Dumbledore was glad they hadn't sent the Aurors off to die.

Of course, if Harry didn't return soon all their caution would be for nought. The stone he had charmed to show Harry's health was still glowing a bright green, despite flickering momentarily a short while earlier, so the boy was still alive at any rate. But as Dumbledore knew full well from the first war, alive did not necessarily mean unharmed.

As Dumbledore paced, Scrimgeour sat in his chair reading the latest report to come from the scrying room, a picture of calm which disguised the frustration the man was feeling being cooped up in his office. Apparently the Azkaban wards had come down as the Dementors had rushed the Azkaban guard room, forcing the Aurors to Portkey to safety and leave the island to the mercy of the Dementors and, apparently, Death Eaters. The last piece of scrying to come through showed an unknown person Apparating onto the island and killing two Death Eaters, before they lost the picture again. Voldemort's ward work, most likely.

As Dumbledore turned to do yet another line of pacing, seemingly on course to wear a hole in the Minister's burgundy carpet, the air buzzed loudly for an instant before the Phoenix apparated in front of the desk, looking out of breath but physically in good shape.

"Dumbledore, I came as soon as I found your note," Harry said, and Dumbledore nodded in acknowledgement of the note he had left on the two-way communications slate as he departed for the Minister's office. "I can confirm the Dementors have indeed gone into open rebellion – Azkaban has been emptied of prisoners, they've all been taken by Voldemort. I chose to run instead of try to fight him and his Death Eaters – the Dementors don't have a particularly pleasant effect on me."

"We lost all the prisoners?" Scrimgeour snapped. "You said you had this under control!"

“Well I messed up, Minister. Excuse me if I’m managing this war pretty much on my own.” The Phoenix shot back, causing Dumbledore to raise his hand to calm them.

“Now now, gentlemen, we are on the same side. Voldemort has his forces back... Rufus, you told me you managed to purge the Ministry most thoroughly, but did not get any useful information from the spies before you... disposed of them,” Dumbledore’s lip curled imperceptibly in disgust, “I think the next course of action is to locate Voldemort’s headquarters and try to stop him attacking us.”

Harry pulled the Portkey he had stolen out of his pocket, still encased in its protective box. “I took this off from a pile of spare Portkeys for prisoners – I think they were there if there were more prisoners than anticipated. This should tell us where Voldemort’s base is, Fidelus charm or no Fidelus charm.”

Scrimgeour gingerly took the black marble and looked at it for a moment. “I’ll give this to the Unspeakables, they’ll know what to do with it.” As he put the Portkey into his desk for later, a piece of paper shot out of his fire, which had flared green, signalling Floo travel. Scrimgeour grabbed the paper and read it intently. “Sit-rep from Azkaban. The hostiles have gone, along with the Dementors. Aurors sent over there have described it as a bit of a bloodbath – it seems whoever didn’t want to join You-Know-Who was... exploded. The Dark Mark is above the fortress.”

“Classic Voldemort,” the Phoenix said darkly. “Whoever doesn’t join him dies, and he likes to leave his mark over places with symbolism. Azkaban is the sign of justice in the Wizarding World, as horrible as it is. Voldemort just broke it.”

“So we find ourselves at a disadvantage.” Scrimgeour said, with no little venom in his voice as he addressed Harry.

“We still have men tailing Voldemort’s forces. I’ve got plans, Minister, so don’t write us off just yet.” Harry replied.

Dumbledore nodded. “We are hardly out of this yet, Minister. I would advise continuing your current course of action, and maybe keeping a

tighter leash on the media. I'm a firm advocate of free speech, but morale must come first in these troubled times. Contact Gringotts and secure their allegiance, we have to keep the banking system functioning or the Wizarding World will collapse into anarchy."

Scrimgeour scribbled down a few notes on a piece of parchment and tossed it into his fire, sending it spinning to its destination with a flash of green. “I’ll get the Gobbledegook speakers on it. Meanwhile, I want you,” he waved at Harry, “to talk to the Muggle Prime Minister again. I heard you contacted him and did a damned better job than I ever could with the man – he doesn’t seem to like me very much. I know he’s not particularly welcoming when it comes to us right now, and I don’t want to have to deal with them as well.”

“Certainly,” Harry said, before jerking his head at Dumbledore as a means of farewell and Apparating back to Grimmauld Place to redirect the Order. Things had changed.

[illegible]

AZKABAN LOST – DEMENTORS RUN RIOT AND YOU-KNOW-WHO'S WORST ARE FREED

Harry scanned the article with relative disinterest, only noting with dark glee that several Death Eaters had been subject to the Dementor's Kiss when he redirected the foul creatures onto them, and flicked through the newspaper to read the self-defence column. After penning a short note to Scrimgeour to compliment him on his excellent anti-Inferi advice, he was interrupted by the dramatic fiery arrival of Fawkes.

“Hello, Fawkes,” he said cheerily, stroking the magnificent bird’s neck and tossing him some of his breakfast toast. “I expect Dumbledore wants to talk to me?” Fawkes sung a note of beautiful song, and Harry laughed as he grasped the phoenix’s tail feathers and was teleported hundreds of miles to the Headmaster’s office in a burst of warm flame.

As he arrived, thankful that Fawkes was much gentler than a Portkey ever was, Harry noticed Dumbledore was looking rather pleased, and instantly relaxed.

“Good morning, Harry,” Dumbledore said pleasantly, and gestured to the seat in front of his desk. “I’ve been wanting to update you on the situation in the castle and give you some information with regards to Voldemort’s Horcruxes.”

Harry sat down and made himself comfortable, and Dumbledore continued.

“Hogwarts itself is as secure as I can make it, to be frank. The Slytherins, who you warned me about, have been relatively subdued in terms of open displays of aggression – I had Professor Snape hold a ‘secret’ meeting with the more overt Death Eater progeny, and they are keeping a low profile for the good of their ‘cause. Apparently they should bide their time until Voldemort makes his move on the castle. While it pains me to hear children talk like this, I feel we have no problems there, and your friends Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger are perfectly safe for now – I have assigned each of them a covert ghost guardian who is keeping an eye on them.”

“Good idea,” Harry agreed. “I might have to look into something similar for the Order.”

“Quite. Now, on the subject of Horcruxes... I believe we have located the final one, which you believe to be Gryffindor’s wand. Using information extracted from Mr. Pettigrew, whom Voldemort used to place the Cup Horcrux in what he must have thought was an ironic location, I have determined that it is in fact at the orphanage that Tom Riddle spent his time in as a youth.”

“Headmaster... Ron and I went there in the future I experienced – all that we found was blasted earth and little else.”

“Ah, Harry, but from what I recall you were attacked before you got to conduct a decent survey of the area. If you had you would have discovered a series of disused Victorian sewer chambers directly

underneath the orphanage, sealed off decades ago and not entered since. Except, it seems, by Voldemort.”

“I see... I’ll have to Apparate into them, I assume.”

“From what I can see, yes,” Dumbledore stroked his beard and ate a sherbet lemon from his desk, offering Harry one with a twinkle in his eye. “As I’m sure you know, this will be incredibly dangerous. Voldemort has his Death Eater corps at his side now, and even has the Dementors. Severus reports that he is not going to do anything for at least a week while he sees to his affairs and organises his next avenue of attack – I fear this war is going to be over very shortly, for good or for ill. No amount of Ministry security seems to be deterring Voldemort – this is a Blitzkrieg of sorts, to try to destroy public morale.”

“This version of Voldemort seems to have been strengthened by the method he used to regenerate his body – he doesn’t waste time.”

“Indeed. Well, Harry, whenever you are ready I will accompany you to investigate this Horcrux, and hopefully destroy it. Once that has been accomplished we can take the fight to Lord Voldemort.”

“Agreed, Headmaster. I propose we set out tomorrow, no time like the present. There’s just one thing...” Harry ate the sherbet lemon Dumbledore had given him, and looked pensive. “That demon he summoned... you said it had been essentially duped by the fact that Voldemort has Horcruxes. Couldn’t we summon it and tell it?”

“I have thought about that very plan, Harry. Unfortunately the nature of demonic bargains means that the demon in question, a particularly foul specimen known as Asmodeus, would be unable to act until the bargain had expired, that is when Voldemort’s new body dies. I assure you then that Voldemort will not be particularly pleased that he attempted to cheat the denizens of the otherworld.”

“Well I have to say I like the idea of sending Voldemort to hell,” Harry said with a smile and got out of the chair. “I’ll contact you tomorrow, Headmaster, about this Horcrux, but for now I was planning to visit the Prime Minister to give him an update. We need to keep that man

sweet, I don't think I need to paint you a picture of what Muggle military technology would do to unprepared wizards."

“Quite,” Dumbledore said, his mouth tightening. “It seems to be one of the only things Muggles all universally excel at, warfare. And I say that as a professed ‘Muggle-lover’”.

“I don’t think you can say Wizards aren’t good at hurting each other, either, Headmaster,” Harry said with a shake of his head. With that, he activated his Phoenix costume and grasped Fawkes’ tail before being teleported into the office of the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in a bright flash of fire and a burst of song.

[illegible]

The Prime Minister ended up breaking a second pen when Harry arrived in a burst of fire – not the best start, Harry reflected.

“Don’t you people ever knock?” the Prime Minister said, with distaste.

“When you can teleport, knocking becomes somewhat redundant, Prime Minister, Harry said, placing his wand onto the desk in a show of solidarity before sitting down in the offered seat. “I’ve come to tell you about recent events in the conflict currently being fought in my world.”

The Prime Minister set aside the papers he was writing, and waved for Harry to continue.

“Our Wizarding prison, Azkaban Fortress, was overrun yesterday by the forces of Lord Voldemort. The guards, minor demons known as Dementors, have defected to his side.”

“And this matters to me because...?” The Prime Minister said, clearly a man not to be side-tracked.

“The Dementors are invisible to non-magical eyes and essentially suck out your happiness, and eventually your soul.”

“Good grief,” the Prime Minister muttered, taking a small bottle of whiskey out of his desk drawer and pouring himself a shot. “Is that all?”

“Far from it, unfortunately. The Dementors are likely to be let loose in Muggle population centres. Wizarding law enforcement, and myself, will do our best to stop these creatures, but we cannot guarantee miracles. As they grow in strength the very weather of Britain will change and become grey and misty, and there will likely be an overall downturn in mood across the country.”

“Does anything good ever come from your god-forsaken world?” the Prime Minister asked sharply. “I’m trying to run the country and you’re telling me that invisible hope-sucking monsters who make the weather even worse than it already is are going to terrorise my people!”

“I’m trying my best, Prime Minister,” Harry said, exasperated. “The prisoners held at Azkaban have also been released, but they will be less of a problem to you unless this war goes badly for us. And I understand you have contingency plans in place in case that happens. I’ve taken the liberty of enchanting this magical stone,” he pulled out of his robe pocket a small piece of quartz which was glowing a bright green, “which gives you an indication as to my personal welfare.”

The Prime Minister took the stone and examined it with interest, before putting it on his desk next to the wand. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“If the light in that stone goes out, then I’m dead. If I’m dead, Voldemort has won. You can then do whatever it takes to restore order.”

“I see. You understand that if that happens, there will likely be a reverse genocide of sorts. I am abhorrently opposed to the killing of innocents, but your world is frankly too dangerous to coexist with ours as it currently is, your people are far too irresponsible with the power they wield. And as I understand it, we were here first. I don’t want to sound like some sort of madman, but that’s how this is going to have to work.”

cheerful banter through the preparation briefing given by Dumbledore, and even now were exchanging glances whenever particular attractive women passed, or when Dumbledore wasn't looking.

It was almost as though there wasn't a war on. And made things a hell of a lot easier when he passed the part in the road where he knew Ron had died. The distraction was welcome.

"Here we are," Sirius said, stopping in front of the orphanage, a fairly grim-looking building. "Twelve feet down, wasn't it Headmaster?"

"Indeed, Sirius. I suggest we use this alley," he indicated one a short distance away, "to Apparate from."

Nodding, the two men followed Dumbledore into the alleyway, avoiding a particularly harassed-looking mother and her progeny, and ensuring no one saw them enter the place. Harry had expected a Death Eater to be on guard in the location, but so far they had seen nothing.

The alley was dingy and strewn with rubbish, much like all the alleyways Harry had frequented in his time, but once they were hidden from view by an overflowing dumpster, the three men nodded and Apparated as one.

The first impression was one of impenetrable blackness, and a musty smell of decay. Hearing the dripping of water in the blackness, Harry clicked his fingers to create a bright light.

"Bloody hell," said Sirius, summing it all up.

The Victorian sewage pipes had been altered to create a large stone and earth cavern under the streets of this part of London, at least twenty metres high and thirty wide in a massive smooth scoop taken out of the ground. Harry, Dumbledore and Sirius were standing on a small outcrop in the walls, overlooking the rest of the cavern, which was barren apart from a very small pedestal on which rested a black box.

In front of the pedestal was a three headed dragon, evidently freshly awoken from a powerful stasis spell by their magic-casting. The dragon was vast; at least ten metres long, and looked like it should barely fit inside the cavern. Its three heads matched its body, being a deep black with rough ridges and spikes, reminiscent of a Hungarian Horntail, and judging by its narrowed red eyes it did not look happy to be awoken.

“What on earth...” said Dumbledore, as the dragon spotted the trio and sniffed the air menacingly.

“I think Voldemort went all out defending this one,” Harry said with gritted teeth, activating his Phoenix stone. “I’ll take the head on the left, you take the one in the middle, Headmaster. Sirius, you can have the one on the right.”

“That one has the biggest fangs,” Sirius complained, raising his wand and casting a number of defensive wards on his chest.

“Gentlemen, I don’t mean to alarm, but I would cast flame retardant spells within the next four seconds, or we will be killed,” Dumbledore said smartly, whipping his wand in a complicated series of movements.

“Good luck,” Harry said grimly, raising his wand. “I think we’re going to need it.”

Chapter 19 – No Respite, No Forgiveness

“Gentlemen, I don’t mean to alarm, but I would cast flame retardant spells within the next four seconds, or we will be killed,” Dumbledore said smartly, whipping his wand in a complicated series of movements.

“Good luck,” Harry said grimly, raising his wand. “I think we’re going to need it.”

Harry, Sirius and Dumbledore managed to throw up a silver Flame-Freezing barrier just as the three-headed beast breathed an enormous stream of white-hot fire at the trio. The flames caused the barrier to shriek and spark, but it held as the fire died down. The dragon then looked at them angrily, and lunged forwards, its heads snapping as the three wizards broke their spell and threw themselves out of the way, off of the small rocky platform they had Apparated onto.

Harry quickly lost sight of Dumbledore and Sirius as the world blurred as he fell. With a quick charm on himself he landed gracefully, and immediately raised his wand and left hand to fire off a blisteringly fast slew of vicious curses into the side of the dragon that was exposed. Various blazes of red, white and black light shot towards the beast, but they had little to no effect on its monstrously thick hide, either bouncing off or leaving shallow cuts.

As one of the heads turned towards him, Harry gulped and began to run as fast as he could away from the dragon, having to duck and roll to avoid a burst of fire. From the other side of the chamber he would hear Sirius swearing and firing spells, including Killing Curses, but the dragon was again unaffected, the spells barely marking its side. Harry winced as he heard the dragon screaming in a language similar to Parseltongue, its rough howls of torment cutting through the sounds of battle on the other side of its massive bulk. It was completely insane.

“HARRY!” he heard Dumbledore yell from the other side of the dragon, where two of its heads were currently snapping and shooting flame intermittently, “GET THE HORCRUX!”

Harry rolled to one side to dodge another gout of flame, slammed a bolt of force into the dragon's head to stun it, and began to sprint towards the pedestal in the middle of the room, pulling his peaked hood down as he did so. He heard howls of agony from the dragon as Dumbledore and Sirius resumed their assault, focusing mainly on the most lethal curses they knew judging by the incantations. Not like Dumbledore, on reflection, but nothing else he'd tried seemed to work, from chains of solid water to crystal prisons which simply disappeared when the dragon touched them.

As he reached the plinth where the Horcrux was kept, Harry began to cast detection spells to ascertain how well protected it was – apparently there was no active dark magic protections in place. Evidently taking the time to check the nondescript box was too much of a hesitation, as Harry found himself engulfed in flame from the dragon within seconds of stopping.

The heat was immense and overwhelming, and the charms on his body and Phoenix cloak were pushed to the limit, the feelings of some of them simply being overwhelmed with a hiss were like electric shocks to Harry's body. He screamed in pain and threw himself to one side, still alight, and rolled frantically to put out the magical flames, his hood the only thing protecting his hair catching alight. As he rolled like a fish out of water, a further tongue of flame washed over his body, completely obscuring him from view under a pyre of holocaustic fire.

Harry screwed up his eyes and hissed spells to dull the pain and heat against his poorly-protected back, feeling his hair and eyebrows catch alight and burn away under the onslaught, but he remained conscious, barely. Once the second wave of fire stopped, he found he wasn't able to hear a thing. Then, barely aware of his surroundings, he felt the ground suddenly move from underneath him and felt hot, stinking breath on the back of his singed head. The dragon viciously bit his leg, one of its canines piercing his thigh, and tossed Harry like a rag doll to one side, sending him careening across the cavern at high speed and slamming into a wall, allowing him to fall into blessed unconsciousness.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

“Ron?” Harry said weakly, awaking prone to his friend, a burly adult with a shock of red hair and several impressive scars, rocking back nonchalantly on a chair in what appeared to be a vista of pure white.

“Nice job, Harry,” Ron said sarcastically, twirling a wand in his hand. “Top notch, taking your eyes off of the enemy to do some dark magic checks.”

“Sod off,” Harry groaned, rolling onto his back and exhaling.

“I can see it hasn’t set in that you’re basically dead, mate,” Ron said, getting up and not noticing the wooden chair he had been sitting on disappear abruptly. He looked just like he had on the final mission the both of them had had, except more relaxed. “Unless, of course, you can get up and give that dragon a good kicking. I don’t think even Dumbledore can kill that thing.”

“Bugger off, Ron,” Harry sighed, content to simply lie there in the white world.

“Can’t do that, mate,” Ron said quietly, and stood over Harry like a giant. “You can, however, do this. Just... focus on what’s inside, draw your power in.” Raising one booted foot, he slammed it down into Harry’s face.

The last thing Harry saw was the dark sole of Ron’s foot rushing towards him, and then-

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Sound filled his ears, heat washed over his face.

Harry opened his eyes, and spat blood all over himself as he lay on his back against the cavern wall, and then vomited to one side, tasting more hot tangy blood as he retched and heaved.

“Fuck,” he said to no one in particular, feeling several bones grind as his muscles spasmed in pain. His left leg was entirely non-responsive, and he felt like his head was submerged in water. He was bleeding from both ears, his nose, and several cuts in his side, not even taking into account the gigantic hole in his left thigh. His black hair was patchy and charred, and he had lost both of his eyebrows.

He focused his energy and managed to fumble a vial from the pouch which had fallen out of his pocket – with supreme force of will he levitated it to his mouth. The lime green potion trickled between his lips and down his throat like the life-giving waters of a desert oasis, filling his broken body with the will to live.

Finally able to cast some spells to numb the burning agony in his limbs, Harry took stock of the situation as he sat slumped against the wall. The dragon was rampaging around, one of its heads hanging dead at an unnatural angle on its neck. Dumbledore appeared to be defending Sirius, who was frantically attempting to break through the wards on the cavern, but with little success. Spellfire slammed into the remaining heads, but with no avail. As he watched with blurred vision, the dragon flapped its massive wings and roared, causing Harry to wince and nearly fall into unconsciousness once more. His back grated as he concentrated, blocking out the raging sounds of the battle around, and he slowly reset his bones with complicated charms instilled into him through the necessity of a life of fighting, feeling sensation flow into his limbs and extremities.

Finally, he grasped the cavern wall and shakily got to his feet, being careful not to put weight onto his left leg before picking up his fallen wand and potions kit.

Sirius and Dumbledore, not to mention the dragon, had paid this little drama no attention, no doubt assuming Harry was incapacitated or dead. He dusted off his Phoenix robes, and repositioned the peaked hood wearily.

“Ding ding, round two,” Harry muttered sarcastically under his breath, firing a jet of viridian energy into his thigh to crudely knit the flesh back together with glowing tendrils of magic – a makeshift battle remedy. Growling in anger, Harry began to draw power into himself

as he concentrated on simply killing the rampaging dragon before him. If he could deal a telling blow, this would be over. Either that, or the exertion would kill him.

Dumbledore, Sirius and the dragon itself paused when they felt air rushing towards the part of the cavern where Harry had fallen.

They turned their heads when they heard the rushing crackle of igniting fire.

“Harry?” Dumbledore gasped, seeing a glowing figure standing tall next to the cavern wall. Tiny pebbles and bits of dust whirled around the figure, bursting into sparks where they touched the incendiary aura he had generated.

“I’m going to kill you for that,” Harry said to himself, before breaking into an inhumanly fast sprint, covering the several hundred metres to the dragon in a few seconds, and raising his wand like a sword, before jumping high into the air and plunging it into the side of the dragon with a screamed incantation, his entire body burning as though he was on fire.

Nothing happened for one long beat, and then the dragon’s two remaining heads screamed in anguish as a deep gouge appeared in its’ side, and thick, almost creamy, blood spurted from the wound. Harry fell gracefully to the ground, before summoning a ball of invisible force into his left hand and banishing the entire dragon with a vicious spell, flinging it into the cavern wall and causing large chunks of rock to dislodge from the roof under the force of the impact. One of the remaining heads crumpled and cracked in the high-speed collision with the wall, leaving only one functional.

As the dragon slid to the floor, hissing and spitting with pain as blood leaked from its side, Harry raised his wand calmly, his entire body still glowing scarlet and orange.

“Nice try,” he growled, before firing a silver oscillating bolt of energy from the end of his wand, lighting up the dim cavern with the powerful spell which caused his arm to buckle with the effort. When the light hit the final head, it drilled straight through and out the other side,

decorating the rock wall behind with brain and claret. The dragon wheezed in shock, and fell limp. Harry smirked, and then his eyes rolled back into his head and he collapsed.

“Merlin! Sirius, get the Horcrux and bring it to me, I’ll get him!” Dumbledore snapped, and Sirius jerked into action, looking back and forth between Harry and the Dragon with a dumbfounded look on his face.

Dumbledore reached Harry’s body and knelt by the boy, brushing his hood back to get a better look. Harry wasn’t breathing, and there was no pulse. As Sirius approached with the Horcrux box, Dumbledore discarded his wand and rubbed his hands together.

“Look out, Sirius,” he warned, before slamming his palms into Harry’s bruised and dented chest, electric blue bolts of energy sparking out of his hands into Harry, causing the boy to buck violently. Noting no change, Dumbledore tried again, with more force. This time Harry jerked, coughed up a thick string of blood, and began to breathe, his face deathly pale.

“Shit Dumbledore, is he alive?”

“Barely. Put the Horcrux there and take him back to base – get Severus to tend to him and tell him I’ll be with you in a moment.”

“Snape? Really?”

“Do it, Sirius!” Dumbledore snapped, and Sirius nodded and Apparated away with Harry’s body, leaving the box sitting innocently in the middle of the cavern, which was pockmarked with burns and decorated with blood and a massive cadaver.

Dumbledore sighed, and stood alone in the cavern. He looked at the dragon thoughtfully, and then back at the box.

“I’m afraid Tom; your safety net has been well and truly removed.” He said to no one in particular, raising his wand to point it at the box.

"He's as stupid as his father."

"So still smarter than you ever were then, Snivellus,"

"At least I had the intelligence not to be incarcerated in Azkaban for years, Black."

Harry regained consciousness to the sound of Snape and Sirius arguing.

No change there then.

He hissed in pain almost immediately, as his body bombarded him with hundreds of signals. His left leg throbbed, his head was pounding and he could feel a sharp pain in his chest whenever he drew breath. In short, he was a wreck despite the magic already at work knitting him back together.

"He's awake!"

"A stunning observation, Black, I can see why they brought you along on that mission. With a pair of eyes like yours it must have been so much easier."

"Oh fuck off, Snape," Sirius said bluntly, grabbing a glass of water for Harry and pouring cool water down Harry's throat. Harry coughed and gagged, but drank greedily.

"Ow." He said simply, when he could finally speak.

"Another astute observation, Potter. Whatever that dragon did to you, you were a hair's breadth from death. You ruptured four of your major internal organs." Snape said icily, standing to one side like an awkward bat; Harry noted that they were in his room at Grimmauld Place, just how he had left it that morning. "'Ow' is an understatement to the amount of pain you would have been in had I not cast potent medicinal spells prior to your awakening. However I must admit the preliminary healing work you did was very useful."

“Made of strong stuff, then,” Sirius said with a wide grin, his own face a bright red where a burn was slowly healing under the influence of a spell. “That was incredible, what you did to that beast!”

Harry smiled weakly. “I couldn’t take getting my arse kicked lying down, could I?”

Snape looked at the pair of them with a disdainful glance, and waved his hand in Harry’s direction, casting a floating crystalline cloud of energy with his fingers as a form of diagnosis. When the cloud pulsed a bright green, he sniffed.

“You’ll live, Potter. By tomorrow you should be back to normal, although I wouldn’t consider taking on a dragon magically altered by the Dark Lord again. Incidentally, he has his eye on Diagon Alley, more specifically Ollivander’s. The Headmaster has stationed more guards there.”

“Thanks, Snape,” Harry said gratefully, massaging his left thigh with a grimace. “Tell him I’ll be ready to help if anything happens.”

“Indeed.” With that, Snape swept from the room, throwing Sirius a baleful glare as he did so.

“Git.” Sirius said succinctly, before drawing up a chair to sit next to Harry. “It’s been a while since we talked, Harry,” he said quietly.

“I know, Sirius, I know. I’ve been managing this bloody conflict, and I’ve been driving myself into the ground.”

“Moony worries about you as well... though judging by today’s display, he doesn’t need to. He says he’s secured the werewolves’ neutrality, but only just. Some joined that bloody Greyback fellow.”

“They were always going to, believe me. That beast has the charisma of a politician when he needs to convince werewolves.” Harry took another gulp of water, and continued. “Anyway, so that’s the Horcruxes destroyed. Only Voldemort now...”

“You say that like its easy, Harry. And it’s not,” Sirius said seriously. “You’re strong – stronger than me, apparently stronger than maybe even Dumbledore... but you’re still the only one who can do what’s needed. Are you sure you can do it?”

Harry looked at Sirius for a long moment. “I... I fought them all nearly alone, for years. Death Eaters, Dementors, Voldemort himself... sure I didn’t manage to kill him, but I’m not a novice.”

“I know, I know. It’s just that... James trusted me to look after you, Harry. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if you got yourself killed fighting Voldemort.”

“Like you did, in the bowels of the Ministry? Good lord Sirius; this is a bit patronising to hear from a man who died being stupid the last time he had a chance at being there for me.”

Sirius winced, “I know, I probably was stupid, you’re right. But that doesn’t mean I can’t do a better job this time. Just... keep yourself safe, yeah? If you see that green light coming, duck.”

Harry laughed quietly. “Let’s just hope Voldemort didn’t go to the Sirius Black School of duelling evasion techniques, eh? Never fear, Sirius, I’ll duck.”

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Dumbledore sat alone at his desk, with not even Fawkes for company, and only a solitary candle to light up the reams of notes that he was scribbling. It had been a day since their fight against the dragon, and Harry was back on form, or so he heard from Sirius. Dumbledore, however, had confined himself to his tower office, dismissing his portrait companions, to work on something.

Something terrible.

He shifted a page of the ancient codex in front of him, muttering under his breath and making constant notes in a coded language he had developed as a child to write his diaries.

Voldemort had learned to cheat Death. Albus Dumbledore was hoping to go one further.

“I just hope it never comes to this...” he whispered quietly to his empty office, turning another wafer-thin page and reading the terrible secrets within.

[illegible]

"You wanted to see me, Prime Minister?"

“Indeed, Davison. Have a seat.” The Prime Minister gestured at a spare chair, and the tall, thin man known as Davison sat down smartly, smoothing the creases out of his immaculately tailored suit as he did so. A consummate tactician, Davison worked as a liaison with the various intelligence agencies and security forces the British Government was responsible for, from the Police to MI5. He was, in a word, nondescript. A carefully arranged head of brown hair, an unassuming face and dull eyes made for a forgettable figure, but all of this helped to conceal the razor-sharp mind behind the mask.

“Davison... I’ve asked you to see me today to ask you about something rather... unusual. I need a task force assembled, the best and brightest from all fields, to deal with a threat facing the British Isles. You would have an unlimited budget and access to any and all technology you need.”

“Certainly, sir. What kind of threat?”

“The force would have to be prepared to face lethal force from people ranging from civilian adults to, I’m sorry to say, children. People who can kill quickly and quietly without warning or indication of their danger.”

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't quite follow. Children who can kill?" Davison leaned forward, looking puzzled.

“Davison... what do you know about... magic?”

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Voldemort stood in the middle of a darkened stone chamber, the only sound audible being the soft rustling of fabric as he surveyed a Dementor before him.

"You will serve me," he said bluntly, his yew wand gripped in his left hand.

"We... we will serve..." the Dementor rasped, its voice a gravelly roar inside Voldemort's head. The Dark Lord's mouth tightened, but he showed no other discomfort.

"You will submit to the spell I have devised to improve your fighting capabilities."

"Not... not all of us..."

"You and one other."

"Tom... Riddle... you are the cheater of death... but it will catch up to you..." the Dementor said calmly, floating a foot off of the ground in front of Voldemort, a faceless shroud in a tattered robe.

"We shall see, Dementor. We shall see." Voldemort muttered darkly, not wishing to fight with the demonic being. With that, he raised his wand, the tip glowing a blood red, and began to move it in complex movements while chanting a spell.

"I will... I will kill the one you call... the Phoenix..." the Dementor hissed, as its body was enveloped in a crackling ray of red light, causing the walls of the stone chamber to be bathed in a bloody glow.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

“You wanted to see me, Minister?” The Phoenix said, stepping out of the Floo network and into the Minister’s office without breaking stride. Dusting himself off, he sat down in the offered seat.

“I’ve received this,” Scrimgeour handed the Phoenix a typed sheet headed with the British Government’s seal, “from the Prime Minister. It appears he takes this situation seriously.”

To Minister of Magic for Wizarding Britain:, it read, I have acted upon advice given by the man you call ‘The Phoenix’ and formed a task force dedicated to aiding the Magical world in the deadly conflict with the terrorist you call Lord Voldemort. Comprising of several police units, army organisations and logistics corps, the force is dedicated to monitoring any Wizarding installation in the UK, and protecting any sites you deem necessary to hold from Lord Voldemort’s followers. The hand-picked men and women involved are focused, professional, and fully briefed on the task at hand, and have professed a total willingness to help in any way they can, and submit to one of your “Memory-Charms” after the operation, if needs must.

We stand by awaiting any requests for this organisation to act – contact Albert Davison on this number – a phone number followed.

Yours sincerely,

John Major

Harry scanned the letter with interest. “Well this heralds a new era of cooperation, as Dumbledore would say.”

“I was considering having some of their soldiers guard Hogwarts and some in the Ministry building, and perhaps some in Diagon Alley if it’s a success.”

“You understand how their weaponry works? Won’t it malfunction in Hogwarts and the Ministry?”

“How do you think we make cameras and watches work?” Scrimgeour said incredulously. “I’ll have a specialist charm their... firearms, I believe they’re called.”

“Well this looked promising,” the Phoenix announced. “I say we should definitely take this opportunity, and introduce an unknown quantity to put Voldemort on the back foot even further.”

“I agree, Mr. Phoenix. The Auror corps, incidentally, can equip the Muggles with the gear necessary to fight in a magical duel with some effectiveness. Additionally, we’ve received reports of Dementor attacks in Muggle communities – a few Kisses, but decidedly few casualties all in all.”

Harry shuddered. “Horrible creatures, Dementors. I would ensure all the Aurors can properly cast a Patronus Charm or one of its variants – it would be invaluable in a battle situation involving those beasts. Voldemort has got his eye on Diagon Alley, from what I’ve heard. We’ll need every man ready to fight if the worst happens.”

“And it’s looking to, with the danger increasing day by day. Hogsmeade is gone... I don’t think public confidence can withstand another blow like that.”

The Phoenix got up and headed towards the Floo, their meeting over. Just before he threw the powder into the fire, he turned back to the Minister.

“It’ll withstand it. What do you think I’m here for?”

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Harry sat at his desk several days later, working on his Phoenix outfit. After the encounter with the dragon, he had had to replace several of the charms woven into the transfiguration on the outfit, and he had decided to upgrade the costume itself to be more... substantial. The final result, which he was decidedly pleased with, looked very similar to the original, but had several sections of interlocking crimson armour plates, on his elbows, chest and legs, reminiscent of Quidditch pads. Hopefully it would give him the edge in a fight.

He had finally got enough coherent reports from his assigned Order spies to build up an idea of what was happening with Voldemort. Tonks had discovered that several of the Dementor attacks were not standard ones – some of the victims had been literally sliced apart rather than Kissed, which was disconcerting as the Muggle witnesses had essentially confirmed it was the work of Dementors and not Death Eaters. Kingsley reported that the Death Eaters were constantly attempting to infiltrate the Ministry, and the constant checks were the only thing keeping them at bay. Mad-Eye, responsible for Hogwarts, had said that the British soldiers had settled in smoothly, despite being slightly overwhelmed by the castle in general, and were camped in the ruins of Hogsmeade so as not to disturb the students, who were kept in the dark. They had several items of heavy equipment, and from the tone of his reports Mad-Eye was very impressed by them overall. It seemed it had a penchant for Muggle heavy weaponry.

Harry himself had pieced together Voldemort's overall plan – to attack Ollivander's in Diagon Alley while also conducting distraction raids, with the aim of stealing the contents of the shop and crippling the Ministry's wand and magical core supplies – if an Auror got their wand damaged or destroyed in a fight they would be hard pressed to replace it in a hurry. Harry noted that he had appeared to change his overall plans from pure offensive to striking at vulnerable points in the Order's supply chain.

Then again, Voldemort wasn't one of the most feared Dark Wizards ever for nothing.

That also said, Harry Potter wasn't public enemy number 1 in the timeline he came from for nothing. Voldemort would have a fight on his hands, whether he wanted one or not.

However if Harry was honest with himself, the Dementor rumours worried him the most... what kind of Dementor cut people apart?

He hoped he wouldn't have to find out. And if he did... well, it was accomplished at killing things, and he doubted Dementors were in the same bracket as three headed insane dragons or a Basilisk.

Chapter 20 – The Precipice of Darkness

It was Friday night, and that meant party night.

Teenagers and twenty-somethings of all shapes and sizes had poured into the nightclub in central Bristol, everyone looking for a good time. Music blared into the club, a converted warehouse which was essentially one large room and some small toilets bolted on the side, and an outrageously-dressed DJ expertly manipulated the turntables as the large crowd danced the night away. The owner of the club stood atop a gantry overlooking the entrance to the club, dressed in a sharp suit and barely fazed by the blinding strobe lights and laser displays which played over the bodies of the patrons.

In his eyes, all of it was money rolling into his pocket. Who cared if a couple of people got wasted on cocaine and ruined their bodies doing so? As long as they bought his drinks and paid the entrance fee, they could do whatever the hell they liked.

He spent some time admiring a particularly lithe young woman dancing on one of the provided glitzy podiums next to the main stage, before noticing, through the flashing lights and dark shadowy bodies, a pair of people slump to the ground next to the bathroom area. People could take drugs, but if they'd OD'd at his club he wanted them out.

"Shane!" he roared over the noise to a large bouncer at the end of the gantry, "Two smackheads by the toilets, sling 'em out of here!" Shane, a huge shaved gorilla-like figure, nodded and went down the metal stairs to sort out the problem, while the owner resumed his observation of his kingdom. Disconcertingly, two men who went to see to the people who'd collapsed also slumped over, seemingly fainting on the spot. The owner then looked closer and saw a black woman near the knot of unconscious bodies fall to her knees, blood spurting out of a huge gash in the front of her spandex top.

"Fuck," he swore, pulling out his mobile and dialling the number to alert all the bouncers that there was a problem – the club doors slammed shut seconds later and all the bouncers converged on the far corner of the warehouse by the toilets area, which was lit by harsh

white lights. Most of the dancers hadn't noticed anything, but still the occasional one seemed to suddenly drop down, and blood was beginning to stain the concrete floor. People nearby also seemed to be crying and holding their heads, as some sort of pessimistic wave hit the clubbers.

The owner punched another number into his phone, preparing to cut the music off and get the punters out if there was a problem. As he watched, Shane reached the group, pulling one of the smackheads roughly to his feet. As the owner watched, Shane jerked, twitched, and fell backwards, a gigantic hole opened in his chest by an unseen assailant.

"Jesus Christ!" he swore viciously, dialling the number to kill the music and then the police. Whatever the hell was going on was not good. The music, a throbbing techno beat, died instantly, and the decorative lighting was swapped with strip lighting, illuminating the surprised clubbers, most frozen in mid-dance or other more embarrassing positions. Bouncers began ordering people to the fire exit as a knot of them surrounded the toilets, which was seemingly littered with nearly a dozen unconscious or bleeding bodies. Seeing the blood, the crowd began to panic and run, with more and more of them falling to the floor, seemingly stunned by forces unknown. The bouncers began to weep and cry, big grown men sobbing and moaning as they were struck by some sort of horrific sadness.

The owner began to quietly panic. What the fuck was happening in his club? People falling down like flies, people bleeding! He heard a loud crack from next to him, and spun to see a figure garbed in a long red cloak with... flames dancing on the hems, a bandana masking his face and armour on his chest and arms.

"Nice night for a party," the man said conversationally. "Although now I would run like hell."

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

The club was very, very fucked, Harry decided upon arrival. A sharply-dressed man with a very fine taste in suits was looking at him

agog upon his Apparition – a clear breach of the Statute of Secrecy, but the way he saw it all the Muggles were going to do when they tried to leave was run into a Portkey to the Ministry anyway, so whatever he did it was going to be wiped from their memory.

The unnatural cold and despair that accompanied Dementors slammed instantly into his mind, amplified by his magical nature rather than dulled by it. He could see a dozen of them swarming like a shoal of dangerous fish in the corner of the giant warehouse-club, their black cloaks touching the heads of the bouncers as they sucked the happiness from them.

But, as he watched, something unexpected and extremely bad happened. Two of the Dementors, bigger than their fellows by a good foot (though what made them bigger was beyond Harry), hovered next to a cowering bouncer and a pair of arms shot out from under their cloaks, ragged and scabbed grey flesh ending in lethal-looking swords of black bone. They flashed through the air with precision, gutting the bouncer in short order before one of them delivered the Kiss.

“Oh... shit,” Harry said, fear beginning to stir in his gut. He pulled out the small communications slate and wrote “HELP” to Dumbledore, with his coordinates after. The smart man next to him was still looking utterly frozen with shock as he did so. Harry ignored him, readied his wand, and took careful aim.

“Expecto Patronum!” he yelled, satisfied to see a solid-looking silver stag erupt from the end of his wand and canter on air down from the gantry towards the swarm of Dementors, including the altered ones. They shrieked, a hideous piercing wail, and scattered, with several of the smaller ones fleeing through an open window near the ceiling of the warehouse. The big ones, however, simply slashed at the Patronus with their bone-swords, dissipating it in short order and leaving a half-dozen Dementors which had spotted Harry. By now the warehouse was essentially empty, with the Muggles having fled in a howling horde into the Ministry’s custody, leaving the bouncers and remaining Kissed.

“Expecto Patronum!” Harry yelled again, his heart sinking as the stag charged out of his wand at full pelt, only to be stabbed in the face and evaporated by one of the enhanced Dementors, which hissed menacingly and attacked Harry mentally, hoping to overwhelm him with waves of despair. Harry’s Occlumency shields held against the surprisingly strong mental barb, and he stood ready on the mental gantry.

“Potter,” he heard in his mind, a roaring hideous sound which spoke of dark corners which should never be explored, “we are going to kill you,”

He realised, with a sickening jolt in his stomach, that the Dementors were talking to him. And they didn't seem to like him. And they knew who he was.

This changed things.

"Effodio!" Harry snapped, flicking his wand at a Dementor which hovered too close to the gantry, punching a hole straight through its robes and causing the beast to screech and hiss, before fleeing out of the open window where its brethren had run.

“We will see you again, Potter. Next time we will not be so... restrained,” one of the Dementors said in Harry’s mind, the reverberating roaring voice bypassing his Occlumency shields entirely. The Dementors turned and sliced a deep gash into a nearby bouncer, knocking the man to the floor with another set of arms which emerged from underneath their cloaks –powerful looking grey arms, albeit without vicious swords attached – before spiralling off out of the window, accompanied by their fellows. As Harry watched, his mouth set in a grim line underneath his bandana, Aurors began to Apparate into the nightclub, wands at the ready. Harry saw Kingsley on the floor below, who caught sight of Harry and nodded. Harry raised his hand in salute and, with one last look at the terrified gentleman standing next to him frozen in shock, Apparated away.

[illegible]

"You say he's altered the Dementors?" Dumbledore said, sharply.

"They had swords for arms. Hell, they had four arms!" Harry said incredulously, gesticulating for effect. "They sliced up the big guys and made short work of my Patronus."

Dumbledore frowned. "This is bad news indeed. The Prime Minister is understandably worried about these... enhanced Dementors. Invisible killing machines would make anyone nervous. The "magical pacification" force he's set up is currently working with the Ministry, but I would be lying if I said things weren't tense. We need to stop Muggles dying."

"They weren't after the Muggles, they were after me." Harry said flatly, before explaining that they had talked to him. Dumbledore looked grave, seated behind his desk in the Headmaster's office during Harry's debriefing on the attacks the night before.

"Talked to you... that sounds like they were the two alpha Dementors, the mouthpieces, of the Azkaban swarm... Voldemort must have done something to them to change them like that. I would be careful, Harry, I really would." Dumbledore brooded for a moment, and then spoke quietly. "Not to purposely change the subject, but you realise it was Miss Granger's birthday on Monday? I have it on good information she spent the entire day in tears as one of her best friends is widely assumed to have died."

Harry started. He had completely forgotten, no, disregarded Ron and Hermione and all those others since he had started his Order work. "Umm..." he began.

"'Umm' indeed, Harry. I am not here to try to make you feel guilty, I am just pointing out that there is a world outside our microcosm of war. And whether you want to or not, you'll have to face it when this is all over. You can't live as the time-traveller forever. 'Harry Potter' is not 'the Phoenix' during peace."

Harry sat in silence. He didn't really have a reply to that.

"Think about it," Dumbledore said. "You'll have to, eventually."

“Whatever the Master wishes...” said a female voice, with just a hint of danger to it. Bellatrix LeStrange, wearing her ornate silver mask depicting a Medusa from ancient Muggle legends, sat at the back of the extravagant dining room in the Riddle Mansion, bathed in shadow. Lucius detested her. Insane and fiercely loyal, an incredibly poor combination for such a position of power in his opinion. But, as she said, whatever the Dark Lord wished...

He looked at Snape. "The Dark Lord has drawn up a list of potions required for the raid. You are to also distract Dumbledore as much as you can."

Snape nodded, taking the list offered by Lucius. "And what of this... Phoenix?"

"We underestimated that man last time. This time the Dark Lord wants our aid in destroying him. Apparently there will be quite a reward for the one to land the killing blow."

In the darkness of the dining room you could almost feel the malevolent greed emanating from the assembled Death Eaters. The Master's rewards were always good.

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

"It's good to have you back, Moony," Sirius said warmly, raising his glass to Lupin. Harry, Lupin and Sirius were seated in a side room in Grimmauld Place, one next-door to Harry's quarters, behind the same paranoid shielding Harry demanded. They were in plush armchairs surrounding a small table, and having a quiet evening in to welcome Moony back from his diplomatic mission to the werewolves. Lupin looked haggard and gaunt, but radiated happiness when he saw Sirius and Harry. While shocked to hear of what had happened in his absence, he wasn't about to back down now.

"So, Harry, I'm very interested in these Dementors you encountered. Bone-swords on their arms, you said?" Lupin enquired, taking a small sip of the wine he was drinking.

Harry thought for a moment, drinking from his tumbler of Firewhiskey. "I only saw them for a moment, really. They had four arms each, two of which had the swords on it. They just looked like blackened sharp swords really. Nothing else different from normal Dementors, apart from the ability to slice through Patroni. I didn't get to try any other spells on them, though."

“This is, if you’ll forgive me, fascinating stuff. Voldemort has managed to alter one of the most dangerous beasts known to Wizardkind!”

“You and him should shack up, Moony, you’d get on like a house on fire,” said Sirius lightly, poking Lupin on the shoulder. Lupin gave him a withering look, a smile still on his face.

“I think he’d rather I fought mindlessly between him and the spells than ‘shack up’ with him, Padfoot. And in any case, I’m taken,” he said coyly, smirking at Sirius’ dumbfounded look.

“If you say it’s with Tonks, things never change,” Harry said, stretching out his legs. Lupin looked surprised, and Harry grinned. “It is her isn’t it! Old enough to be her father, how unlike you Moony. I knew she was writing to someone, I didn’t think it would be you,” he said with mock disapproval, drinking more Firewhiskey.

“Don’t make me hex you, Harry,” Moony replied.

“Pfft, this is the man who killed a three headed dragon with just a few spells, having had the shit kicked out of him,” Sirius crowed, patting Harry on the shoulder. “And Dora? Better not hurt her, Moony, she’s a Black. Though the things she could do in bed with that talent of hers...”

The three men paused for a moment in tipsy reflection. It was almost as though there wasn’t a war on.

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

“Focus your power inwards,” Dumbledore commanded, looking at Harry sternly. They were in Harry’s Grimmauld Place bedroom, with the furniture swept aside as Harry tried to replicate the effects of the fight against the dragon. Voldemort was laying low, still preparing to attack Ollivander’s, and Harry was eager to confront him again. Dumbledore disapproved, he knew, but that was the only way this was going to end.

He closed his eyes, dressed in his Phoenix costume, and drew his power inwards like he was inhaling. He felt a crackle and buzzing on the surface of his skin, but it dissipated before anything dramatic happened. Dumbledore looked pensively at him, waving his wand absently as he did so.

“Try to relax your body more. As if you were casting a particularly difficult spell, except hold in the power behind it without saying an incantation.”

Harry closed his eyes and tried again, relaxing his body so he was resting on the flats of his feet and his arms hung limp. He drew in a deep breath, and tried not to tense up as he felt magical power building up, ready to be formed into a spell of any kind. He kept his mind as blank as possible, trying not to give the magic an outlet in the form of any incantation or intent (his wandless magic, ironically, worked against him here), until he felt the buzzing feeling once more. This time he physically exhaled slowly and inhaled once more, pooling more and more power.

His head began to ring with the feeling, and he felt an immense pressure behind his eyes. Something popped gently in his nose, and hot blood began to dribble from his left nostril. Ignoring it, he finally tensed, forcing the power to do something. There was a rushing sound as air was drawn towards him, and then he felt power rush outwards, over his body.

“Congratulations, Harry!” Dumbledore said, observing Harry burst into what looked like flame, as in the dragon’s cavern. Harry opened his eyes and looked at his body. He felt himself tiring as he maintained the magic, but his body was literally charring the very floor he stood on. With a nonchalant flick of his finger, he smashed a chair in the corner of the room into matchsticks.

“It amplifies spellwork which is focused on one object,” he noted. Not very good for fighting multiple targets. What do you think this is, Headmaster?”

“I have experienced something similar, Harry,” Dumbledore said, directing various spindly instruments he had brought from his office at

Harry's body. It's simply a manifestation of your magical core, concentrating itself as you concentrated your magic. Think of it as a duelling technique of sorts – hard to maintain but gives you boosts in some areas. I, personally, do not use this particular magical ability very much as my body is rather older than yours and I fear it could damage me. But you should explore this, I feel."

Harry relaxed and the glittering flames surrounding his frame faded. He looked at the floor and noticed black scorch marks. "I'd better be careful if I'm standing on a flammable surface..."

"I'd imagine Madame Pince wouldn't be particularly happy with you doing that in the Library," Dumbledore chuckled. "But in the midst of battle it could give quite the psychological advantage over the Death Eaters. However, I suspect Voldemort can do something similar, so I would be on your guard. We have very few advantages in this war, bar our spy network. Voldemort simply seems to manufacture his."

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

It was Tuesday, the last Tuesday of September (had it only been a month since the Express fight? Harry certainly considered it to have been an eternity), and it was the day of Voldemort's raid, supposedly designed to cripple the Auror network's supply of magical wands and massacre civilians in the heart of Diagon Alley itself.

The Prime Minister had been informed of this, and had taken steps. Four unmarked vans full of Magical Pacification (as they had become known) units, men from mixed areas of military and law enforcement and all sworn to secrecy. Equipped with a medley of Muggle weaponry and magical defensive items, they had worked with the Ministry to ensure that the conflict, if there was one, didn't spill out into the street. Of course only Scrimgeour 'officially' knew there was to be a raid that morning, Ministry security was good but far from entirely watertight, but the Prime Minister knew enough to make sure the men were there.

Two dozen in all, all on alert and all well trained. All ready to kill. Despite the Prime Minister's threats of a total crackdown, they had

been told to go for the men in the masks and follow “the bloke in the red” in case of an emergency. To some of them it was a joke, and they shared easy banter, but others understood that they were facing people who could kill with two words. That was not to be joked about.

Whatever happened, the Magical and Muggle world were about to meet each other, and not in a good way. These Muggles were not the stupid witch-burners. They were the grim faced helmeted riot officers wielding assault weaponry loaded with vicious anti-armour and incendiary rounds. They had had a good few days to practice operations against magical opponents, and they had the advantage of fighting an enemy that didn’t know to duck a grenade.

It was going to be close.

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Ollivander sat in his workshop at the back of his store, unknowing of the danger he was in, on the morning of the raid. He was crafting a wand, a fine creation of holly and unicorn hair, 9 inches with surprising rigidity. His dusty shop was quiet – it wasn’t school shopping season so he usually only got the odd request from an Auror or magical experimenter.

He knew something was wrong when his runic wards, tuned to detect Dark Marks, began to glow a bright sickening red, illuminating his face and hands with light.

So, they had come for him at last. He knew the Dark Lord Voldemort wouldn’t let his wand shop escape his baleful gaze. Ollivander, however, was not a stupid man.

Far from it.

When the first white-masked Death Eater blasted his workshop door off of its hinges, Ollivander was already smartly stepping into the Floo behind his workbench. As the Death Eater fired a Killing Curse into the green flames, a mass of alarms began to wail from inside the

shop and outside, alerting the whole of Diagon Alley that there was trouble.

[illegible]

Ministry Operations Room

"Alarms have gone off in Ollivander's wandmaking shop," a stony-faced wizard. "From what I can see someone went through a private Floo network which immediately disconnected after use. It led to a house in France."

“Ollivander got out then,” Kingsley said gravely, presiding over the Ministry operations room and studying the scrying screen, which was displaying manic dots moving frantically evacuating Diagon Alley as the anti-apparition wards kicked in, trapping whoever set the alarms in there. “Send a team to retrieve him, and send the Aurors into the Alley. All of them. Tell them to kill, not capture.”

[illegible]

Grimmauld Place

"And so it begins," Harry grinned, activating his Phoenix stone and stowing the slate which had just delivered him news of an attack. He grabbed his potions pack, ensured his wand was in his pocket, and Portkeyed away into the Leaky Cauldron.

[illegible]

“We just got a message from Davison that something is going down in the Alley,” the captain of the 24 man Magical Pacification squad barked into his radio. “Stay alert lads, we’re probably going to be called in any moment.”

[illegible]

Grimmauld Place

“Constant Vigilance!” Moody barked as the Order members who were available to run to the Alley assembled in the living room of Grimmauld Place. A pitiful dozen, but good enough. Sirius grinned from under a rough glamour and Moony nudged him, nodding at Moody’s antics. Moody scowled at their levity in the face of danger and tossed the assembled members a length of rough rope, with him holding one end.

“In three seconds this goes. Three, two, one-“

[illegible]

Voldemort looked into his scrying plate, and smiled. So Potter and his little Order had taken the bait. Voldemort, like Ollivander, was not a stupid man, he knew he had a spy in his ranks, just not who. His Inner Circle thought that this was a simple smash and grab mission, but he knew better.

Oh no, the objective of this mission was to kill the Phoenix. To kill Harry Potter. The secrecy meant his men were somewhat on the back foot, but they tended to largely compensate for things like that with their single-minded penchant for violence.

With flourish he touched his wand to his Dark Mark, signalling his unsuspecting Death Eaters to activate their Portkeys, which would take them into the Alley. With another flourish he remotely activated a mass Portkey for the Dementors lurking in the undercroft of the Riddle Mansion, shielded from the rest of the house.

It was going to be a bloodbath.

With one last look around his sumptuous master bedroom, Lord Voldemort Portkeyed himself away.

He had a score to settle.

Chapter 21 – Battle Royale

Ministry Operations Room

“Merlin,” the operator swore, feeling sweat bead on his brow. “Auror Shacklebolt, you should see this,” he waved vaguely at the wall scrying-screen. The picture of Diagon Alley had gone from relatively empty to a total mess as the picture updated itself. There were four distinct groups, ranging from several squads strong to just a dozen, scattered around the Alley, and they had all arrived within seconds of each other. As Kingsley watched, lost for words, the scrying screen’s identification spells picked out the registered IDs for each group in neat script.

Dementors (origin: Azkaban Fortress)

Unknown (origin: Unknown)

Auror forces (origin: Ministry)

Death Eaters (origin: Unknown)

“Keep the Minister constantly updated. Keep the wards up on that place. No one Apparates in or out. Close the Floos. And for the love of Merlin keep the press away. This is going to be bloody,” Kingsley snapped, activating his Portkey and sending himself spinning away into the melee.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Harry personally thought everything might be alright when he arrived in the Leaky Cauldron. The place was deserted; the patrons and Tom himself having made a wise exit once the alarms had started blaring, although said alarms had stopped now. He’d found himself standing in front of the musty bar, full drinks still on the tables. Just as he’d thought this wasn’t that bad, the enchanted brick wall separating the Leaky Cauldron from the Alley was blasted into fragments by a powerful spell, ripping the back door entirely off its hinges and sending it spinning past Harry to slam into the opposite wall.

He raised an eyebrow and readied his wand, cautiously looking out of the back door through the dust and pulverised rock to see the Alley beyond. He saw not much besides a deserted road, with shops leading off round the dog-leg towards Gringotts and Knockturn Alley, but noticed a black cloak whip out of sight.

So the Death Eaters had arrived, at least.

He Disillusioned himself and strode out of the Leaky Cauldron, before jumping with a magically-assisted leap onto the roof of the apothecary to the right of the street. He then nimbly hopped across two roofs until he found himself on top of Quality Quidditch Supplies, and got a view of the carnage below.

And carnage was the only description. The Alley was already slick with blood, and it was simply a sea of battling red and black, like a scene from a battle in a Muggle ancient history film. The battle was almost hard to look at, with the bright flashes going between figures and various people getting thrown around by particularly powerful spells. As he watched Harry made out Kingsley, fighting two Inner Circle members, and Moody, who was simply slaughtering all comers with his leg in its magically enhanced form.

As he watched, transfixed, he felt a cold chill, and his heart filled with dread. He looked to the right over the roofs, towards the gleaming marble of Gringotts, and saw a black cloud appear at his level. The Dementors. At their head were the pair with swords, and they were all watching him like sentinels, despite his Disillusionment charm. For a moment nothing moved, the sounds and screams of the battle and spellfire resounding below them. Then, as one, the Dementors rushed forward in a howling horde, and Harry whirled to the side over the tiles of Quality Quidditch Supplies, an incantation on his lips.

“Arcesso Fiendfyre!” he yelled, thrusting his wand forward. A plume of flame erupted from Harry’s wand, resolving itself into an oversized dragon as it met the horde of Dementors head on, absorbing the mass of black cloaks in a tornado of fire and flesh. Harry roared in anger, keeping the Fiendfyre under his control as his arm juddered from the strain and the tiles around him began to crack and warp

under the heat, before finally he couldn't keep the spell up and the fire dissolved into nothingness, leaving a thick heat haze behind. The two sword-wielding Dementors floated, apparently unharmed, with a dozen of their scattered brethren, most of which were on fire. With a wounded howl they fled into the sky, leaving the alpha pair behind. The air reeked of burnt flesh and fabric, and Harry was pleased to see a thick cloud of ash blow over the raging battle below, which hadn't apparently noticed the altercation on the rooftops.

"Potter..." one of the Dementors hissed. "You will pay for that slaughter..."

They lunged forward, black blades raised, and Harry thrust his forearm forward to meet the first strikes, which nearly dislocated his shoulder as they struck sparks off of his armour. With speed that made them into a blur of grey and black, the Dementors struck again, forcing Harry to wandlessly shield himself while parrying weakly. They lashed out again and again, bone meeting armour and scoring deep scratches in the metal, as Harry was forced slowly backwards towards the lip of the roof. He began to panic, barely able to keep up with the Dementors, when he realised that they were toying with him, driving him over the edge of the roof.

Scant steps from oblivion, he pushed out with his magic, knocking the Dementors' swords back before inhaling like he had in Dumbledore's office. Fuelled by fear and the possibility of a messy death at the hands of the Dementors, his body caught alight within seconds of drawing the magic into his body, and he smiled wickedly before lunging forwards.

"Extorqueros!" he barked, sending a jasmine bolt directly into the dark hole in one of the Dementor's cloaks where their face would be. With a sickening splattering sound, dark viscous blood poured out of the front of the cloak as the Dementor's head exploded, sending it falling to the ground as a useless sack of flesh and fabric. The other Dementor howled, and Harry felt his Occlumency shields shatter under the mental assault, driving horrific memories of the previous war into his mind. Dead children, burning houses, Hermione, Ron... he fell to his knees, dropping his wand and narrowly avoiding a decapitating strike by the Dementor, before gasping as the mental

assault weakened and he managed to throw up a faint shield, sending the second stabbing blow bouncing backwards off of a red wall of magic.

He looked up from his kneeling position and, with a snarl, lashed out with his left hand, driving it into where the Dementor's midriff should be. One bellowed incantation later and a blue rope of lightning arced from his knuckles and into the Dementor's body, sending it into jerky spasms and completely breaking its mental attack. Its cloak caught fire on contact with Harry's body, but it recovered enough to swing one of its sword-arms in a sweeping strike towards Harry's face. Harry panicked and threw up his hand, catching the blade in mid-swing and holding it in place, the sword unable to cut his burning, magically shielded hand. With a dark laugh, he raised his other hand.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" he bellowed, imagining Voldemort's death, sending a silvery stag into the Dementor at point blank range out of his palm, and felt a rush of satisfaction as the injured burning beast was tossed into the air by the Patronus and sent spiralling off of the roof. After five seconds of waiting, the Dementor did not return, so Harry let the power he had been holding onto fade and adjusted his hood before looking back off of the roof to the battle below, tossing back a potion as he did so.

The battle was still raging strong, and there was no clear winner as of yet. The Aurors and Order were outnumbered, but they made up for it in skill. The focus of the battle was on the marble steps of Gringotts itself, which had barred its majestic doors firmly against the battle. Kingsley, Moody, Sirius and Lupin were standing at the top of the vast stairs, fighting a knot of determined Death Eaters while the rest of the Aurors were in a rough semi-circle around them, their backs to Gringotts and the rest of the Death Eaters trying to force their way through the lines.

Checking the Disillusionment charm was still on, Harry sprinted across the roof of Quality Quidditch Supplies and leapt onto the adjacent roof, and then the next, until he had reached the vast wall of Gringotts, which towered over the building Harry was on. He looked down, judged the jump, and leapt with a cry, firing several Sectumsempra curses as he did so, before landing nimbly next to

Sirius, who was shocked to see his opponents literally split in half at the waist as Harry's spells hit.

"Need a hand?" Harry shouted over the noise, sending a vicious crimson lightning bolt at a pair of Death Eaters, who managed to block it with a combined shield. He casually blocked their reply spells with his forearm, before slashing his wand diagonally and firing a hail of lethal shards of metal into the Death Eaters, lacerating them severely and sending them howling backwards.

"Har-Phoenix! Glad to see you made it!" Sirius said with a grin, neatly sidestepping a Killing Curse and responding a Pulverising curse of his own. As Harry watched, the Aurors began to retreat backwards towards Gringott's, and he quickly helped the four men next to him vanquished the small group of Death Eaters who were inside the Auror semi-circle. With a glance he noted that there were around thirty-odd Aurors to nearly seventy Death Eaters, but the Inner Circle seemed to have vanished from the ranks, leaving the poor quality minions to attempt to overwhelm the Aurors.

"AURORS!" Harry cried, thrusting his wand into the air and dismissing his Disillusionment charm. "WITH ME!"

He somersaulted gracefully off of the top step of Gringotts, soaring over the heads of the Auror semi-circle, and fired a muddy brown bolt of energy into the middle of the Death Eater throng. Where it hit the cobbles the pavement itself was torn asunder, sending Death Eaters flying and opening a wide chasm in the ground, which zigzagged into Knockturn Alley opposite the bank and out of sight. Harry landed on the roof of a robes-shop opposite, and turned to blast the vulnerable rear of the Death Eater lines with spellfire, only to hear a curt incantation which made him throw himself clear off of the roof and into the thick of battle below, praying he wouldn't fly straight into the crevasse he had just created.

"Avada Kedavra!"

It wasn't the spell – he could dodge those easily. It was the voice. He knew that voice.

Voldemort.

[illegible]

Dumbledore Portkeyed into the Alley next to the joke shop Gambol and Japes, up the road from Gringotts and Knockturn Alley, dressed in scarlet robes which could be considered austere compared to his usual fare. He arrived just in time to feel the very earth shake as an excavation charm more commonly used for mining tore a massive gouge in the cobblestone pavement, courtesy of Harry. Looking down the street he saw the fierce magical melee being fought on the steps of Gringotts, with the Auror and Order forces penned against the bank by a horde of Death Eaters. As he watched, another figure Portkeyed into the Alley. Voldemort, his elegant robes and long black hair unmistakeable, even from behind. Voldemort looked up at a rooftop, which was just out of sight for Dumbledore, and fired a Killing Curse upwards with chilling precision.

Harry, in his Phoenix costume, somersaulted into view and disappeared into the throng of Death Eaters, only to toss several of them aside like rag dolls with some spellwork and dart up the steps of Gringotts to resume his bombardment of the enemy forces.

“Tom!” Dumbledore called out, readying his wand.

Voldemort stiffened, and turned, smiling. “Dumbledore. Come to fight, at last? How unlike you.”

Dumbledore looked sombre, his beard beginning to wave in an invisible wind as he prepared for the duel. "Tom, you of all people know that we must choose between-"

“What is right, and what is easy,” Voldemort finished with a sneer. “What sentimental foolishness. You know how this will end. You will be slaughtered, old man.”

"I feel you shouldn't write me off just yet, Tom," Dumbledore finished wearily, before raising his wand and shifting his feet into a duelling stance. Voldemort raised an aristocratic eyebrow, and within a blink

of an eye his wand had lashed forwards, sending a green Killing Curse straight at Dumbledore, who lazily summoned a cobblestone out of the ground to absorb the blow, which shattered the stone into fragments. With another wave of his wand, the particles of stone turned into crystal chains, which shot at Voldemort, aiming to ensnare him.

Voldemort hissed and waved his right hand, banishing the chains forcefully into a nearby shop window, caving it in easily and ruining a display of collectable quills. Dumbledore followed up with an oscillating golden curse, which Voldemort ducked, and then waved his wand once more to turn the cobblestones which Voldemort was standing on into water. With a muffled yell, Voldemort fell several inches into the water before he caught himself with a levitation charm, seething with rage. He pushed his wand forward and the foot-deep pool he was floating above was emptied as the water turned into superheated steam and rushed at Dumbledore in a tight spiral of scalding water. Dumbledore, his face placid, conjured up a wall of glass which the steam hit harmlessly, before shattering the glass with a tap from his wand and sending it at Voldemort in a tornado of razor-sharp shards. Voldemort easily deflected the glass, before moving swiftly to close the gap between the two duellists.

"You haven't lost your touch, Dumbledore." He said with scorn, before firing off a trio of Cutting curses followed up by a Killing Curse, forcing Dumbledore to throw up a silver shield and duck to the side. Voldemort pressed his advantage, slowly advancing on Dumbledore while sending out Killing Curses punctuated with vicious Bone-Breakers and Decapitating curses, aiming to cripple the old man as quickly as possible. Dumbledore, for his part, defended himself admirably with shields of opaque vermillion, purple and marble, easily backing up from the approaching Dark Lord.

"Tom, I must say that you never were a very original fellow when it came to dispatching your enemies. If you would do something more than simply throw out Unforgivables..." Dumbledore said, as though commenting on the weather, while backhanding away a curse which would have drilled through his chest. He twirled his wand like a conductor, and several dozen spears of light arced into the air out of the end of it with a beautiful silvery ringing, flying high into the sky.

Seconds later, they shot back down like the wrath of God, pulverising the cobbles where they landed and forced Voldemort to duck and weave in what looked like a cage made of white light. The Dark Lord was too slow, and his shoulder was gashed deeply by one of the arrows, but he scarcely noticed it.

Dumbledore, without missing a beat, shot a wave of flame at the Dark Lord to keep him on the back foot, and followed up with a bludgeoning curse so powerful it distorted the air it travelled through. Voldemort simply walked unharmed through the sheet of orange flames, failing to see the invisible curse before it hit him in the ribs and sent him sprawling, his enchanted clothes absorbing the worst of the blow. Snarling in anger, the Dark Lord sprung to his feet instantly and threw a handful of summoned dark flames at Dumbledore, which only grew when Dumbledore attempted to banish it, forcing the venerable Headmaster to throw himself to one side, rolling out of the way of the sphere of fire. With a terrible cry, Voldemort thrust his wand into the air, and Dumbledore heard a rumbling from above.

He looked up, casting a shield, only to see the whole top half of the quill shop they had damaged earlier rush towards him. He roared, channelling power into his shield and turning it into a turquoise dome of light as the building hit him and the world turned into hellish noise. After two long seconds where all Dumbledore could hear was the sound of things breaking and being crushed, the debris parted where the building had broken on his shield like water on a rock, revealing an angry Voldemort in a microcosm of clean air amidst an Alley thick with brick dust. Dumbledore dropped his shield and threw himself flat onto the floor as a Killing Curse streaked above his head, only to be pounded into the cracked cobbles by a vicious bludgeoning curse to his back. He coughed, his beard streaked with powdered brick, and rolled out of the way of a second curse, before staggering onto his feet and parrying a third curse.

The storey of the house had shattered almost completely on impact with Dumbledore's sturdy shield – it had slammed into the opposite side of the road under its own momentum, demolishing the front of Gambol and Japes, and had come to rest as a small hill of broken timber and stonework filling the entrance to the shop in question. The

quill shop now stood open to the sky, its top reminiscent of a jagged mountain peak made of broken bricks and exposed joists.

Dumbledore, coughing with the dust fumes, ducked a Killing Curse and replied with a brutal lightning spell which enveloped the shield Voldemort brought up, the thick stands of electricity swarming over the green magical surface and literally shattering it under the strain, forcing Voldemort to jump backwards to avoid the spell. He was panting slightly now, as was Dumbledore, the exertion of the dramatic attack with half a building taking its toll. Dumbledore stood amidst the rubble, and noticed the battle on the steps of Gringotts was petering out as the Death Eaters pulled back into Knockturn Alley in the face of the staunch Auror red line. Bodies littered the Alley, some of them burnt or cut, others perfectly unmarked – that cause of death, at least, was obvious.

“Dumbledore!” he heard someone shout, and he glanced over Voldemort’s shoulder for a brief second to see Harry, garbed in his Phoenix costume, leap over the Auror line to run across the blood-splattered cobblestones to reach Voldemort. As Harry approached Voldemort reached his hand into his robes, and a scant second later five Inner Circle members appeared by Portkey between Harry and Voldemort, forming a line. As one, they readied themselves to attack.

“I’m not finished with you yet, old man,” Voldemort said darkly, readying a new spell. “Avada Kedavra!”

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

“Ah... the Phoenix,” Harry heard one of the Death Eaters hiss, her voice unmistakeable behind the ornate Medusa mask.

“Lestrangle,” he said grimly, gripping his wand tighter. He was beginning to tire, the battle on the steps of Gringotts had taken a lot of magical energy, but he was far from spent just yet. From what he could see the Inner Circle members were Malfoy, Lestrangle and her husband and two unidentified Death Eaters. Dumbledore and Voldemort were still duelling fiercely, even though Dumbledore had just had half a house thrown at him.

Bellatrix raised her wand in a languid motion, evidently about to spout off some more banter designed to distract Harry, but Harry was having none of it. With a sharp jab he fired a bright white flare from the end of his wand, which blinded the Death Eaters and slammed into Rodolphus Lestrange, sending the man flying off of his feet in a poor start to the battle for him. Harry ducked a swift Killing Curse from Bellatrix before crossing the gap to a dazed unnamed Death Eater in a flash, driving his fist into the man's stomach and shoving his wand into one of the eye-holes in his grotesque silver mask.

"Jakesquo," Harry spat, and a thick bronze spike shot out of the end of his wand and into the Death Eater's eye socket, sending him flat onto his back and killing him instantly as it buried itself in the unfortunate man's brain. Harry ducked instinctively as soon as he had cast the spell, barely avoiding a Decapitating curse, and dived to one side to avoid a long whip of fire from Bellatrix, which cracked loudly where he had just been crouching. He fired a Killing Curse over his shoulder followed by a second bright white flare, and leapt into the air from where he had landed after his roll, assisted by a Levitation charm. As he rose he pirouetted like a ballet dancer to see the remaining four Death Eaters, three of them clutching at their masks as the bright light seared into their retinas and one, Bellatrix, simply taking careful aim at Harry.

She hissed a curse, sending a tight spread of red beads, almost like buckshot, which seared into Harry's chest armour where they struck and shot him clean out of the air and into the wall of a vacant pet shop opposite, and then sprawling onto the cobbles with a groan. Bellatrix then cast a spell which lifted Harry clean off of the ground and sent him slamming once more into the earth, the force of the impact cracking several of Harry's ribs. He spat blood and rolled weakly to one side to avoid a third curse, and Bellatrix only laughed.

"Pathetic, Phoenix. The Master said you would be a challenge. Avada Kedavra!"

Harry's world slowed to a crawl as the Killing Curse left Bellatrix's wand. Spasms of pain were shooting from his chest to his brain with every beat of his heart, but he ignored all that. He inhaled deeply,

praying he could pull off the magical phenomenon – he desperately needed the boost in power. He kept inhaling as the Killing Curse drew closer, lighting up the side of the building he was next to with its eerie green light, before he burst into flame and threw himself to one side and back onto his feet, dodging the Killing Curse with a second to spare. As Bellatrix goggled at his burning body, Harry then used left hand to fire a Bludgeoning curse at the second unknown Death Eater, sending the man flying off of his feet and through the window of a shop opposite – there heard a sickening crunch and Harry guessed he wouldn't be getting up.

“So quick to assume you've won, Lestrangle,” Harry said mockingly, ignoring the stabbing pains in his chest and abdomen. Malfoy looked at the Phoenix's burning body, checked his master was still furiously fighting Dumbledore (he was – Dumbledore was grappling with a summoned snake at the time while Voldemort shot curses at him) and bottled it, running back down the road into Knockturn Alley to join the other Death Eaters.

“Coward!” Bellatrix screeched, throwing another curse at Harry while shaking her fist at Malfoy's retreating back. Harry smartly parried the curse towards Rodolphus, and blocked a second curse with his forearm before replying with a Killing Curse. Bellatrix laughed behind her mask and pranced out of the way of the deadly spell, and glanced over to see Voldemort launch Dumbledore twenty feet into the air with a powerful wind spell. Harry took advantage of her distraction to press his advantage, his arm turning into a blazing blur as he fired off five spells at Rodolphus, who was standing only scant feet away.

To his credit, he managed to block three of them with a hasty azure bubble-like shield. However, the shield was popped by a silver arrow which drove into his gut, and then his left hand was entirely severed by a Sectumsempra curse. As Rodolphus howled in pain and doubled over, Harry flicked his wand dextrously and fired an Effodio bolt, which Bellatrix, screaming in anger, deflected in a shower of silver sparks. She threw Harry what was probably a look of hatred from behind her mask and grabbed her husband and his hand before Portkeying away. Harry sighed and let the flames around his body die as he healed his ribs back into working order – or at least enough not to hurt every time he drew breath or his heart beat.

Now for Voldemort.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Moody was barely thinking. He didn't need to when he fought, his arm just flowed in a long string of motions and his mind supplied the spells in a combination which meant he was constantly casting spell after spell. He was slowly advancing towards Knockturn Alley, where the remaining Death Eaters had holed up, with four Aurors in the front row of the force. The narrowness of the alleyway, as well as the sodding great crack now running through it thanks to Potter, limited their available numbers, but that also worked to their advantage as five poorly-trained Death Eaters at a time were child's play to defeat. He had heard a colossal crash earlier, like a building collapsing, but couldn't dwell on it for long, as the battle was still raging.

They were winning, that was certain. The Death Eaters simply... weren't very good. Auror techniques were the best for a reason. The Death Eaters had certainly reaped a toll on the Auror forces – they had lost a good deal in the initial fracas – but Moody was quietly confident of their chances.

The Auror forces had barely moved into the side Alley away from Gringotts when Moody heard a chilling rushing noise, like a strong wind. He heard shouts and yells from Gringotts, and glanced backwards to see the Aurors and some of the Order on the front steps fighting more Death Eaters, most of whom were obscured by a building and around the corner from Knockturn Alley, towards the Leaky Cauldron. They had been outmanoeuvred by Death Eater backup! He, Mad-Eye Moody, had been caught off guard!

Well... there was only one way to go, in his opinion. Forward, into the Death Eaters huddling at the end of Knockturn Alley, and probably through them if he had his way.

"Come on Aurors!" he shouted, breaking into a loping jog, his wooden leg tapping a beat onto the cobbles with every other step, "keep going!"

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Harry made his presence known by firing a Killing Curse at Voldemort's back – it was worth a try, in his opinion. The Dark Lord didn't even bother to dodge, simply Summoning a bit of debris from the remains of the quill shop to intercept the curse before he pushed hard at Dumbledore, who was beginning to flag, knocking the old man to the ground.

Voldemort whirled around, seeing Harry looking determined and none of his Inner Circle still standing.

"You," he spat angrily. "I know who you are, Potter."

"Congratulations, Tom, it's nice that we're on name terms now." Harry said mockingly, slightly worried about Dumbledore, who seemed to be struggling to get up. Voldemort's black hair was a mess, matted with dust and grime, and his robes were slashed in several different places. He had a blooming bruise on his cheek and a congealing gash on his shoulder, but other than that he was ready to fight. Dumbledore, on the other hand, seemed to be relatively unmarked. Harry had an uneasy suspicion that he was badly internally injured.

Voldemort looked furious, and was gripping his wand until his knuckles turned white. "What have you done to yourself, boy? How are you so skilled?"

"Not summoned a demon, if that's what you're asking. I like to think I employ a better class of helper than you, thanks," Harry said sarcastically, stalling for time until Dumbledore got up. The Headmaster was coughing up blood into his bedraggled beard, and was now on his knees.

Voldemort's eyes widened slightly in shock. "What are you?" he said, with a tinge of doubt in his voice.

"Tell me, Tom... what do you know of prophecies?"

"So it is you in the prophecy Severus heard," Voldemort said, not lowering his wand for an instant.

"You didn't hear the whole thing..." Harry said darkly, shifting his feet into a duelling stance and pulling his hood down securely. "You missed, unfortunately, the bit where it talks about the person in question having 'power the Dark Lord knows not'. I like to think it's my talent for surviving, but I'll leave it up to you to come to your own conclusion. Avada Kedavra!"

The spell shot out of Harry's wand, bathing the Dark Lord in a green glow, before he hissed and sidestepped it. Dumbledore, now on his feet, nodded wearily at Harry and Portkeyed away, presumably to get Fawkes to patch him up.

Voldemort fired black lightning from his free hand as soon as he dodged the Killing Curse, whipping his wand in a circular motion to create a strong wind to accompany his attack. Harry whispered a charm and a polished silver mirror appeared in front of him, deflecting the lightning bolts at a crazy angle into the sky and blocking the worst of the wind. He then banished it at Voldemort and shot a trio of golden bolts out of his wand, which the Dark Lord somersaulted over smartly.

"Burn, Phoenix!" Voldemort shouted, shooting a plume of Fiendfyre at Harry from the end of his wand, engulfing the Phoenix in the fire for an instant before Harry managed to jump backwards out of range, patting down the small fires on his costume. His green eyes glinting dangerously in the firelight, Harry stabbed his wand forward to unleash a torrent of deep blue water which cut straight through the Fiendfyre and hit the Dark Lord in the chest. With another incantation the water froze, locking Voldemort in place with icy fingers as Harry then shot a series of curses at Voldemort.

The Dark Lord brought a palm down onto the frozen pillar of water, shattering it with a surprisingly powerful blow and allowing him to duck the spells just in time. Harry followed up with a devastating purple ball of energy which hit Voldemort's conjured shield and was absorbed right into it, filling the green semi-circular defence with purple veins before exploding it inwards, slicing into Voldemort's flesh

with shards of magic. Voldemort staggered backwards, clutching his bleeding cheek in shock, as Harry rushed forward to close the small gap between the two and land a solid punch to Voldemort's stomach.

The Dark Lord's eyes bulged as the wind was driven out of him by the magically-assisted attack, and Harry grabbed the back of Voldemort's head with his free hand and shoved it downwards into his knee, which rushed up to meet Voldemort's face like a hammer blow.

There was a sickening noise on impact, and Voldemort howled in pain before going deadly silent. Harry held him off of the ground by his hair and pointed his wand at the crown of the Dark Lord's head. There was a long beat.

Just as Harry began to form the two words which would end the war, Voldemort burst into dark flames, searing Harry's hand through his leather gloves and blasting him backwards through the air. He righted himself just in time before he hit the cobblestones and managed to land on his feet, the sounds of the Gringotts battle echoing behind him. Voldemort was wreathed in black fire and his eyes had begun to glow red, which Harry recognised as being very similar to the magical phenomenon he had personally experienced in the dragon's cavern.

"This ends here." Voldemort said flatly, his voice reverberating with awesome power. His nose was slowly dripping blood, but he didn't seem to notice. Harry quickly inhaled and managed to, thankfully, activate the magical fire within seconds. Voldemort's eyes narrowed at the sight of the Phoenix engulfed in crimson flames, but said nothing.

For one second neither of them moved, spellfire and screams the only sounds in Diagon Alley. Then, as one, they moved to attack, rushing towards one another until they were scant feet away before beginning the duel anew.

It was a blur to Harry, based on instinct and fuelled by sheer adrenaline. They were close enough to touch each other, each combatant whipping his wand left and right to either knock away the opposing wand or cast a frantic shield in the face of an attack. All he

could see was black dancing flames and Voldemort's angry face, and he supposed all Voldemort could see was a red cloak and fire.

His mind was simply on autopilot as he fought to stay alive. EffodioDolorEvertoxuroStupefySignumTelumKirentus – the incantations blurred into one long string of syllables, with his wand twitching and jinking, seeking a gap in Voldemort's defences, continually frustrated by either a solid shield or a hand pushing him aside at the last second.

The close quarters fighting had only been going on for less than a minute, but it felt like an eternity. He could see beads of sweat appear on Voldemort's head, only to be instantly turned to steam by the flames coating his body. His arms, conversely, were beginning to scream in protest as he pressed the attack. They were evenly matched, it seemed.

Only...

Harry could feel that he might...

Just...

Not...

Have it.

His wand slashed diagonally across his body, severing a line of purple flame Voldemort had been pushing forwards, and then twisted viciously to stab Voldemort in the side. Voldemort brought his free hand down in a pendulum-like block, knocking Harry's wand aside and bring his up to pierce Harry's neck. Harry jerked his head back, but it was close.

Voldemort had had nearly forty years of duelling experience and studying. Harry had, at most, five decent years. This wasn't something Harry felt he could win in the long run, not with less than a second to react to Voldemort's attacks.

He punched Voldemort in the stomach with a hand wreathed in fire, but Riddle barely flinched as he slapped Harry's wand to one side and sent a bolt of electricity towards Harry's face. Harry dodged it, barely, and lashed out at Voldemort's shins with his feet. The Dark Lord sneered, shifting his balance to avoid the low kick, and then thrust out with his wand to stab at Harry's face. As he did so, a voice roared from somewhere to their left, and a wall of silver fire shot between the pair, separating them as they gasped in shock at the magical attack.

Dumbledore stood on top of the pile of debris in front of Gambol and Japes, his wounds healed and his beard cleaned. Fawkes sat perched on his shoulder, and his wand smoked gently from the magical firestorm he had just created. Harry and Voldemort, as one, looked at him, and then looked back at each other.

They raised their wands and lunged at each other, one a black figure of flame, the other crimson. With a blinding flash they hit each other full on, and when the light died down they had passed each other, skidding gently over the Alley's cobbles.

Dumbledore watched, in horror, as Harry staggered where he stood, turned unsteadily, and looked up at him. The Phoenix's hood fell back and his bandana came free, fluttering to the ground to reveal the face of Harry Potter, looking strangely blank. Then, with sickening slowness, the head of the Boy Who Lived slid from his shoulders. It bounced once on the cobblestones and then lay still, staring up at the sky with glassy eyes.

Harry's body staggered like a limp marionette, taking one wavering step before pitching forwards. Blood spurted from its neck and silently pooled underneath its chest.

Dumbledore stood, open mouthed, as the force of the arterial spray began to recede, before finally stopping after several seconds.

Voldemort fell to his knees several feet away, a ragged hole torn in his stomach. Blood bubbled from his lips as he Portkeyed away, too severely injured to continue fighting.

The sounds of battle were barely audible to Dumbledore, but as he watched, one noise cut above it all; the anguished cry of Sirius Black.

Chapter 22 – Magical Pacification

Dumbledore stepped off of the pile of rubble, his entire body numb and distant. He knelt by Harry's decapitated body and gently picked up the head, which had an empty look. Fawkes trilled sadly and Dumbledore sighed, his body shaking slightly.

"Harry..." he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Sirius' howls of distress continued over the sounds of battle by Gringotts, and Dumbledore heard heavy footsteps approaching as he stared deep into the blank, green eyes of the Boy Who Lived.

"Harry," Sirius said simply when he reached Dumbledore, and fell to his knees over the headless body, fat tears falling from his eyes onto the corpse's bloody chest. "Harry, no!" he groaned, grabbing the body's shoulders and pressing his forehead against it, sobbing.

"Sirius..." Dumbledore said, absently. "Sirius, we have to get the Aurors out of here, and the Order..." he couldn't tear his gaze away from Harry's vacant stare. "If anyone sees who the Phoenix was," his heart gave a lurch at his subconscious use of the past tense, "this will become too much for all of us."

Sirius continued to cry, his body shuddering and causing him to splutter as he struggled to draw breath. "Please... Dumbledore..." he choked, "do something, bring him back... James trusted him to me, he can't be dead..."

Dumbledore took a laboured breath and put the head gently onto the cobblestones. "Sirius... I will take care of Harry's body, you need to ensure the Aurors get out of here and pull back to the Ministry, the Muggle Prime Minister may do something drastic once he finds out what has happened here."

Sirius gave Dumbledore a tortured stare, his face damp and shining with tears and the glamour he had put on completely gone. He nodded, finally, and carefully let go of the corpse, getting back onto his feet. His robes were caked in the blood of the Boy Who Lived where he had knelt next to the body. He gave Harry's remains one

last look and slowly jogged back to the steps of Gringotts, shouting hoarsely for the Aurors to retreat on Dumbledore's orders. Dumbledore remained kneeling by the body, Fawkes gently nuzzling the side of his head as he struggled to marshal his thoughts.

He dimly noticed the Aurors outside Gringotts and in Knockturn Alley Portkey away as one, leaving the Alley to the mercy of the Death Eaters. Dumbledore did not like this at all, but he knew the Magical Pacification forces were sitting just outside of the Alley, and things were about to get very bloody between Muggles and Wizards.

He gingerly picked up Harry's head and placed it on top of the body's chest, before Portkeying away with it in tow.

It was time to do what was right, and damn himself for it.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Outside The Leaky Cauldron

In the dim interior of the command vehicle for the Magical Pacification forces situated outside the Wizarding shopping area of Diagon Alley, a red light began to flash on the wristband of the squad captain. A broad, tall man with a walrus-like moustache and a no-nonsense approach to the issue of magic, he had drilled his men to treat the potential magic they were going to face as just another obstacle, rather than the potent paranormal force that it could turn out to be.

"That's the signal," he said sharply, pushing a button on his wristband to kill the light and then turned on his group radio. "We're to go in, listen to the men in red if possible, and kill all hostile targets. If you see a green light, duck. Remember the enemy does not know what we are capable of – shock and awe tactics, gentlemen."

The backs of the vans flew open to let the soldiers and police officers disembark – they were all dressed in matte black uniforms with body armour and various identical bronze magical trinkets attached to their chests and wrists, supplied by the Ministry to help them. They carried a medley of weaponry; most had grenades hanging from their belts

like bizarre fruit, and the vanguard of the group were carrying assault shotguns while the rearguard toted grenade launchers. Surprised shoppers screamed and ran backwards as the armed men viciously kicked down the door of the Leaky Cauldron and swarmed inside, finding no one around.

“Radio to base to lock down the main road,” barked the captain. “The magical entrance has been breached – the wall is gone. Signs of battle in the street beyond. We’re moving in.”

They moved swiftly, covering one another carefully as they stepped over the ruined debris that was once the magical walled entrance of Diagon Alley and into the Alley proper. At a signal from the captain the soldiers lowered gas masks onto their faces, instantly becoming almost inhuman figures. There were sounds of laughter and cheering from around the corner – the soldiers could hear crude shouts and catcalls.

The captain signalled with his submachine gun for the point men to ready grenades as they rounded the dogleg into the main section of the Alley. Frightened wizards and witches, people who were unable to get out in time and were now cowering in the second stories of the shops, watched them warily through gaps in the curtains, but the soldiers didn’t notice.

The point-man of the group rounded the corner, a silver concussion grenade readied in his gloved hand and the other firmly gripping a pistol. He saw a beautiful marble building dominating the curiously antique-looking street, but more importantly there was a large group of black-robed and white-masked figures standing in front of it, playing with corpses garbed in red. The marble was scorched and chipped in places, and gore splattered the steps and cobblestones of the street. Bodies in black and red littered the blood-streaked street, and the group outside the marble building was levitating a couple of red-robed ones and playing grotesque games with them as a form of victory celebration. Beyond that the point-man could see very little – the air was thick with dust fumes and visibility was poor.

One of the Death Eaters glanced away from the rest of his group and noticed the point-man. As he raised his arm to shout and alert his

friends, the point-man raised his sidearm and shot him three times in the chest while tossing the grenade underarm to clatter at the foot of the marble steps. The Death Eater staggered backwards clutching his chest and side, before slumping to the ground with a gurgled cry. The rest of the group, two dozen in all, dropped the corpses immediately and turned as one to see the vanguard of the Magical Pacification unit advancing around the corner. One of them, a silver masked gentleman, raised his wand.

One second later, all hell broke loose. The grenade went off, a deafening explosion combined with a wall of concussive force which blew four of the Death Eaters off of their feet and knocked several of the group over. With a roar most of the Magical Pacification unit sprinted round the corner and took up positions in the entrances of various shops and behind some fallen debris.

“FREEZE!” shouted the captain. “YOU WILL SURRENDER OR WE WILL CONTINUE TO USE LETHAL FORCE!”

One of the Death Eaters had managed to get up a shield to block the grenade, he spat and threw a curse at the Captain, who simply ducked smartly and shot the Death Eater with a burst from his firearm – the Death Eater was entirely unprepared for a non-magical assault and was launched backwards off of the marble steps as red holes stitched into his chest, his white mask cracking as he hit the ground. The Death Eaters who had recovered roared and began to fling curses at the Magical Pacification unit – the grenade had knocked them off balance, however, and several of the spells went wide. Those that found their mark were absorbed by pale blue shields which appeared at the last second – gifts from the Ministry. At an order from the captain the grenade-launchers fired with a dull thump, sending spherical black blurs into the middle of the Death Eaters.

The grenades detonated on impact with shields and flesh, scattering the Death Eaters and Auror cadavers in all directions and either killing or stunning the vast majority in a spray of blood and shrapnel. With another barked order the shotguns fired with a terrible cracking noise, peppering the Death Eaters with a vicious spray of rounds and sending several of them spinning away at a crazy angle, covered in blood.

Very few of the remaining Death Eaters managed to recover, and those who did were quickly shot with a further round from a grenade launcher to shatter whatever shield they brought up before they were riddled with bullets from the various firearms carried by the Magical Pacification unit. Within seconds it was all over – Gringotts' steps were strewn with corpses and slick with blood and, in some cases, chunks of flesh. The battle for Diagon Alley was over.

The captain stared through the thick panels of his gas mask, breathing heavily. "Spread out and secure the Alley, and the one beyond," he hissed into his radio. "Make clear any civilians are under arrest, and that we control this shopping complex. Wait for further instructions."

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

"I'm telling you Prime Minister, this is unacceptable!" Scrimgeour said with exasperation. "We're keeping the wards locked down on Diagon Alley for now, but you must tell your men to retreat! You've gathered up the civilians like cattle!"

"I told you, Minister, this is now our war as well. The man you call the Phoenix is dead, your resistance is going to falter without him, I can tell that much. The Magical Pacification unit will continue to occupy Diagon Alley for as long as it takes to ensure the Wizarding World knows we are not to be trifled with. You lost one too many times, Scrimgeour. I told you before if you were so incompetent as to not be able to fight your battles, I would have to do something drastic. I have."

Scrimgeour went a deep red, akin to a Gryffindor lion. "This is an act of war, Prime Minister. I'm already fighting the bloody Death Eaters, don't make me contend with the Muggle military as well!" he took a deep breath, before continuing. "I'm going to have to ask you to remove your soldiers within the next twelve hours, or there will be consequences. Who do you think wards and protects your office?"

addressed them sharply, as the de facto head of the Order – McGonagall was trying to keep the school under control.

“Diagon Alley is currently under the control of the Muggle Government,” he announced, to everyone’s shock. “The Phoenix is dead, killed by You-Know-Who. Dumbledore has taken his corpse and not reported back to me or anyone else – they have both disappeared. The Ministry is in uproar, but we are holding together. The Muggle Prime Minister has backed down over the Alley and will return control soon, I am told.”

“Friends, this is not a good day for the Order. He Who Must Not be Named has struck a telling blow on the Auror corps, and eliminated one of the few people who seemed to know how to fight him. I’m not going to try to paint a pretty picture here – we are going to lose this unless we can pull together. The Death Eaters are ruthless and murderous; the werewolves are joining them in greater numbers now, despite Remus’ best efforts. The Dementors are gone, destroyed by the Phoenix, but that is small consolation given the circumstances. Before I continue, I would like to raise a glass to the man who, for a short time, gave all he could to help us win this. The Phoenix,” he raised a small glass he had in his hand, and the vast majority of the gathered group did the same, with a solemn murmur.

“We have yet to hear from Dumbledore, but as an Auror I can guess what needs to be done. Hogwarts is a major target; Diagon Alley has already been targeted, the school might be next. St. Mungo’s, the Ministry... we have several vulnerable points and simply not enough people to cover them. To win this we can’t stand by and be reactive – we need to hunt down and eliminate You-Know-Who’s support. Passive aggression worked, but that was before one of the strongest members of our group was killed and the heart of our economy attacked. The Minister barely managed to keep relations with the goblins intact.”

“We’re not a militia,” Mrs Weasley piped up, looking nervous despite her usual fastidious nature. “What about my children?”

“The time has come, Molly, where we can’t afford to make that distinction,” Lupin said softly, and several people nodded sadly. “The

Death Eaters aren't going to care who you are, only that you oppose their racist ideology. We all have to do our bit, whether it's patching people up, guarding areas or fighting. The murders, the terror... They aren't going to stop."

A short witch at the back of the crowd nodded. "My son was killed in Diagon Alley. I'm going to do my bit."

Kingsley smiled. "I'm sure we all will, but for now we need to keep calm and listen to Dumbledore. He's never led us astray. He'll be back soon."

[illegible]

Dumbledore wiped his brow. He'd set up the candles, affording a weak glow of orange light in the oppressive darkness. He now consulted his notes, trying not to look at the body he was standing right next to, which was slowly cooling.

Next he needed to prepare the floor.

[illegible]

“Lucius... tell me, do you like your hair? I’ve always admired it,” Voldemort said silkily, stroking Lucius’ trembling bowed head with an idle hand. He was fully healed from the battle that morning, and was practically jumping with the thrill and rush of victory. But before the celebrations, punishments and examples needed to be made. Lucius had run. Now he was being punished.

“I... I do my Lo-“

Voldemort hissed a spell, and within an instant Lucius' head caught aflame, sending him jerking and screaming to the ground from his kneeling position, batting frantically at his head. With a spat incantation from Voldemort the magical fire died, leaving Malfoy in a sobbing heap, his head a mass of bleeding burns and singed hair. The small stone chamber they were in began to reek of burnt hair.

"You are a coward, Malfoy," Voldemort roared, kicking Lucius viciously in the ribs. "You ran when the Phoenix fought you, you left Bella to fight him alone, and her husband, who was more loyal than you have ever been, lost his hand. To make matters worse, this is hardly the first time you have failed me."

"My... my Lord..." Lucius whimpered, curled up in a foetal position. Voldemort ignored him, brushing a lock of black hair out of his eyes.

"A hand for a hand, I think," he murmured, and Lucius stiffened in horror as Voldemort lazily levitated his left arm before placing his wand in the centre of his left palm.

"My Lord..." he moaned, "please have mercy..."

Voldemort merely whispered a spell, and Lucius' hand exploded in a shower of bone and gore. Lucius himself screamed in agony and started to convulse on the floor, while Voldemort merely magically cleaned his face and robes, which were dotted with blood.

"This is only the beginning, coward," Voldemort hissed, placing a foot carefully on the ruined stump of an arm Lucius had left, gently applying pressure until Lucius howled in pain and began to twitch even more. "Only a few Dementors survived that battle. One of them is a... special specimen. I intend to have him as my right hand man, as 'twere. I think you'll want to meet him, Lucius."

Lucius merely gibbered where he was hunched up, in a place beyond pain by now. Voldemort snapped his fingers and the enhanced Dementor which Harry had blown off of the roof materialised in the small chamber out of thin air, its breathing a ragged groan and its swords poking out of its robe sleeves.

"Lucius... I would like you to meet Umbra. Dementors are so rarely given names, but I feel I am the type of wizard to ignore such trivial conventions."

Voldemort smiled a dangerous grin. "I will allow you to get acquainted with Umbra. You should note his... effects are much more potent than

a normal Dementor. He has been instructed to leave you sane for as long as possible before getting to know you a little better. Maybe you'll even get a Kiss..."

Voldemort strode out of the barred door leading into the stone cell as Lucius' delirious screams rose into howls of despair and suffering, echoing throughout the Riddle House and putting a fearful damper on the raucous celebrations going on in other parts of the house.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Hogwarts

It hadn't been the same since Harry had been kidnapped. Ron and Hermione had stuck together, they had to, but things hadn't been the same.

Classmates had whispered and tried to be friendly with them, but it was only because now they were interesting, and might know something about the mysterious Boy Who Lived; the boy who was a grown man who had been kidnapped. It was almost perverted in its fame-seeking transparency.

News filtered through very slowly into the castle now; there was an aura of fear. Some children had had their parents killed for being spies; others had had their parents declare themselves as Death Eaters, and naturally came to blows with the offspring of Aurors. Ron and Hermione kept out of it as much as possible – they hung around with Fred and George, who had become remarkably protective of their younger brother, particularly in the light of Percy and his teacher-focused sycophantic nature when it came to rule bending.

Things were holding together. Just. It was as though Hogwarts was a perfect flower with a slowly rotting ball of roots underneath; all it would take was something dramatic to happen and the illusion would be shattered; Slytherins being targeted by the other Houses, hysteria, attacks on the Muggles camped in Hogsmeade... The fact that wizards were being arrested by Muggles now was bad enough; the Ministry had barely managed to smooth that one over. Diagon Alley

was still locked down, with all banking being done by owl. Hardly ideal.

So it was a very stressful morning for Professor McGonagall, acting head of the school in Dumbledore's mysterious absence, when Draco Malfoy was delivered his father's severely burnt severed head via a black hawk. The boy had fainted, and a minor riot had broken out in the Great Hall. Everyone had been told it was a fake; a sick joke. But the Slytherins knew the truth, as did the teachers.

Voldemort was never one to tolerate failure.

And so the tension in the hormonal boiling pot that was Hogwarts was cranked up another notch, while its Headmaster unknowingly slaved away, trying to save the world.

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

As Draco Malfoy took delivery of his unexpected package, the Prime Minister sat in his office, deep in thought and looking out of the window into a grey sky. He had lost his rag with Scrimgeour, which had been a mistake, in reflection. When the green stone, which was now flawlessly clear, had faded, he had acted immediately, not knowing the situation. The Death Eaters had been removed from the Alley, certainly, but maybe the detention of magical civilians was too much.

He leaned over to the portrait of the ugly man on his wall which had always stubbornly refused removal, and gave it a tentative wave. The ugly man inside gave an imperceptible nod, and after several minutes the Floo flashed an emerald green and Scrimgeour walked through, looking harried and dusting ash off of his robes.

"Prime Minister." He said smartly, pointedly not shaking the Prime Minister's hand.

The Prime Minister didn't bother with pleasantries; Scrimgeour didn't want to be patronised. "I want to apologise for my actions yesterday. The Magical Pacification force is going to be placed under Ministry

control for now. This is our war Minister, not just yours. I would rather Britain be by the Wizarding World's side than against it."

Scrimgeour smiled a tight smile, and nodded. "Thank you, Prime Minister. Unfortunately I can't stay to chat, but that's definitely a load off of my mind. I'll try to keep you updated, but things are very close to the wire at present. The Phoenix is dead, the head of the Order is missing and the Goblins are threatening us with economic strife. It's almost as if the damned creatures haven't noticed there's a war on," he ran a hand through his grizzled mane, exhausted.

“What about international aid?”

Scrimgeour laughed, a harsh bark. "The Confederation of Wizards? Don't make me laugh. They fear You-Know-Who. When this is over Dumbledore will be coming down hard on the countries that stood by while we burned, mark my words."

The Prime Minister gave a sympathetic sigh. "It's in war that you find out who your friends really are."

His fellow leader nodded, before turning to head back through the Floo. “And you always find those things out when it’s least convenient.”

[illegible]

After a long night of calculations and drawing, the floor was done. The corpse had begun to smell halfway through; he had put an incantation on it to embalm it until the morning, golden sparks covering the body and head in a skein of light.

Now it needed to be... repaired.

[illegible]

Voldemort sat in a tall-backed chair, an imperious, gloating look on his face. His Inner Circle, its membership somewhat altered since the

attack on Diagon Alley, squirmed under his stare as Bellatrix, who stared at him with disturbing attention. They were in the dining room of the Riddle Mansion for a debriefing, but the centre of the table was drawing nervous glances from the assembled Death Eaters.

Lucius Malfoy's headless burnt corpse was slowly rotating upside down over the middle of the long oak table, its feet roped to the chandelier which was providing a dim light to the well-decorated room. Voldemort enjoyed the effect it had on his minions; next time there was a battle they wouldn't run. Rodolphus was the only one apart from his wife who had a smile on his face; he had got a beautiful silver hand from the Dark Lord for his loyalty in fighting the Phoenix.

"Friends," Voldemort said quietly, causing the tension in the room to rise a notch. "We are victorious over the Phoenix. The damned Order lies in disarray, the Muggles are only making the situation worse in their clumsy actions... we are in a good position to cleanse their filth from the world."

"What do you want us to do, my Lord?" Bella said breathlessly.

"Patience, Bella," he said, raising a thin hand and smiling from behind a curtain of silky hair. "First, I would like to introduce you to someone Lucius," he gestured at the rotating robed corpse, "had the fortune to meet before his demise... Umbra," he waved a lazy hand and out of the gloom behind his chair a Dementor glided forwards, eliciting a hiss of surprise from the Inner Circle. Yellow pinpricks of light glowed from its hood – the Dementor had eyes, unique for its kind.

"Master... it's beautiful," Bella sighed, admiring the black swords protruding from the sleeves of Umbra.

Voldemort smiled a thin-lipped smile. "Unfortunately we do not have time to rest on our laurels. Dumbledore has gone missing, according to Severus, and I task the Death Eaters with finding him. I want the old fool dead, and then we march on the Ministry."

In the darkness there was a murmur of assent from the Death Eaters.

“Additionally, any member of my organisation committing the sin of cowardice like Lucius will find themselves spending a night with Fenrir, who is arriving tomorrow. I’m sure he will enjoy lecturing you on your folly.”

[illegible]

“We failed them, Remus,” Sirius said miserably, knocking back a third Firewhiskey and slouching in his armchair. “We failed Lily and James.”

Remus patted Sirius' arm unsteadily, himself on his fifth glass of wine. "Harry... Harry did his own thing, Sirius. He made his choices," he took another sip. "We weren't to blame, You-Know-Who was."

Sirius stubbornly wiped away glistening tears. “It makes my blood boil,” he growled, “that Wormtail, that little runt, is skulking in this house somewhere. Dumbledore hid him away, or so I’m told.”

Remus nodded sadly. "Killing him is hardly going to bring Harry back," he said solemnly.

“No, but it would make me feel better having seen my godson murdered in front of my eyes.”

Remus had nothing to say to that.

[illegible]

It was peaceful where he was. White light filled him, and he could hear faint music coming from some far off place.

There was no exertion, no strife. He was completely relaxed and completely at peace.

He wasn't conscious, per se. It was more like he was swimming in the feeling, as it overwhelmed him in a force more powerful than the strongest Imperius curse.

Harry felt, in some small part of him that could still formulate coherent thought, that he had earned this.

Chapter 23 – “Why?”

Deep beneath Hogwarts, below the large lake which dominated its grounds, there was a chamber. The Chamber of Secrets, built by Salazar Slytherin centuries hence, and the home of a deadly Basilisk snake, who answered only to the Heir of Slytherin. After two openings of this dangerous Chamber, both by Tom Riddle, Harry Potter had managed to slay the Basilisk and cause massive damage to the chamber with a misplaced spell, decapitating Slytherin's mighty statue and bringing the roof of the Chamber down in some areas.

It was here that Dumbledore found himself, kneeling next to Harry Potter's corpse, several months later. The Chamber was still strewn with rubble, most of it pushed to the far sides of the room by Dumbledore, and the Basilisk remains, what was left of them, had been banished along with the debris.

Dumbledore had spent the night drawing intricate and arcane symbols onto the smooth stone floor of the chamber in different coloured chalks, working entirely in silence with only a brief consultation as to his notes every so often.

Thinking too hard about what he was going to do would simply make him hesitate, he had already made his decision when he began to compile his notes. He was dancing on the precipice of oblivion, dabbling in the darkest magics known to Wizardkind. Horcruxes were like Cheering Charms compared to what he was trying. Raising the dead was not taken lightly in the Wizarding world. Summary execution was the punishment, no matter who performed the act. Voldemort had used a demonic entity; Dumbledore knew such a trick would not work in this situation.

When Harry Potter had been a youth, Dumbledore had told him that no magic or spell could raise the dead. Dumbledore had been lying. Necromancy, however, was something even Voldemort would balk at attempting; the personal risks were far too great. Dumbledore examined the body, and sighed heavily, the weight of his situation pushing the air from his body. He personally was the figurehead of the Order and of hope in the Wizarding World. But he could do nothing to truly save it. The prophecy would stay in place; Voldemort

was still essentially invincible unless Harry himself did the deed. So the Wizarding world's mantle of hope had to shift from the tired old man to the cold, dead, youth lying in front of him.

And Harry was dead, and so they were all lost. But Dumbledore was not a man to give up; he had come too far and sacrificed far too much. Now he was willing to sacrifice his humanity to give Harry Potter a third chance at winning this war.

He ran a hand over the corpse's chest glistening chest, and gently touched the neck, where the severed head had been hand-sewed back on with a silver needle and thread, the join line clearly visible against the deathly white pallor of Harry's skin. Dumbledore was a skilled healer, and he had painstakingly rejoined the musculature and tendons of Harry's neck back together to fully reattach the severed extremity, for all the good it did a slowly rotting corpse.

He blinked and yawned, before downing a small vial of yellow potion to counteract the effects of an all-nighter preparing his unspeakable ritual.

Next Dumbledore stood and raised his hand, levitating Harry's glittering corpse slightly and moving it over into the centre of a gigantic circle. Inscribed onto the floor of the Chamber was a series of circles, pentacles and other geometric shapes, interlinked with chains of runes and written spells, forming a large spiral of shapes ten foot across radiating out from the central circle where Harry's body lay, encrusted with his blood and still garbed in the transfigured Phoenix robes, with the preservation spell shining like sparks over his body. The chalk was a mixture of red, black and gold, forming a dazzling and intricate display which was worthy of artistic exhibition, if it were not a channel for the darkest magic Dumbledore had ever studied. At the moment it was simply pretty to look at, but an experienced wizard would sense the underlying wrongness of the whole arrangement.

Dumbledore just shut out the bad feelings. He had been preparing for the eventuality of Harry's death, and now he had to put those plans into action.

He just hoped Harry would, could, forgive him.

[illegible]

Hagrid was sitting in his cabin, watching the sun rise. Two days previously Diagon Alley had been sacked by the Death Eaters and Dumbledore had disappeared, although with the Phoenix the papers were all banging on about.

Good man, Dumbledore. Hagrid hoped he was alright.

The sun was peeking over the mountains that surrounded Hogwarts, spilling a stunning display of purples, golds and reds into the brightening sky, injecting the horizon with life and vigour. As Hagrid watched, however, the sky suddenly began to darken once more, as though midnight had rapidly reasserted itself over the morning. The sun was snuffed out by a thick curtain of blackness, and Hagrid began to hear the sound of thunder in the distance, accompanied by small flashes of lightning from beyond the mountains.

The clouds, previously fluffy and lit up by a beautiful multi-hued sunrise, were now darkened and beginning to spiral unnaturally over the lake, forming a whirlpool of water vapour high in the sky. An ominous rumbling began to resound from an unknown source, like the slow growl of some colossal beast.

Something bad was happening, but Hagrid didn't for the life of him know what.

[illegible]

Dumbledore paused as he stood in front of the large geometric spiral he had carefully drawn on the floor. As he dismissed the golden preserving spell on Harry's corpse, he caught a distinct smell of necrotic flesh before the floor began to vibrate slightly, small pieces of debris moving along of their own accord as the Chamber began to rumble.

Hogwarts herself had sensed what was happening in her bowels, and was reacting accordingly.

Dumbledore drew himself up to his full height, still dressed in the scarlet robes he had donned before going into battle two days previous, and flourished his wand. He gazed at Harry's still body, and sighed.

"I'm sorry, Harry," he whispered, before bring his wand down in a sharp movement and barking an incantation which roared from his lungs, blowing dust and debris at his feet into the air in a great billowing cloud, and causing Hogwarts to shake particularly fiercely. The dim light he had set up in the Chamber darkened instantly. Dumbledore took another deep breath, and said another incantation, bringing his wand across as viciously fast as before. Again the Chamber rumbled and the dust clouds morphed and changed under the force of the incantation.

Around Harry's body the series of shapes and pentagrams began to glow, before darkening into a sickly purple, the colour of a fresh bruise. Dumbledore spoke another word, his voice cracking slightly, and immediately his nose began to bleed as the Chamber walls cracked under the strength of the words he was saying.

As he shouted a final incantation, the sound of screams rose in the Chamber of Secrets, a piercing keen which sliced through Dumbledore's hearing and forced the old man to his knees, the greatest wizard of the age slumping down under the strength of his own spellwork.

Above Harry's corpse, a deep black line appeared in the air, like a slit in fabric, and the screams began to intensify. Dumbledore coughed, blood splattering from his nose onto the dirt and sizzling where it hit the purple glowing spiral, and hissed one last word before falling forward into unconsciousness amid the sound of screaming children.

Unseen to him, the dark line began to widen.

[illegible]

Underneath the lake, in the Chamber, the spell Albus Dumbledore had wrought continued unchecked.

The dark slit in the air had widened into a perfect, shimmering circle about the breadth of a man. Dumbledore lay face down on the rocky surface, blood leaking from his nose and ears, barely breathing. The purple spiral made up of many shapes was glowing brightly as Harry's body began to stir with an unseen wind, the sound of frenzied screaming echoing around the Chamber.

Then, suddenly, a great gout of flame issued forth from the black circle, and the screams reached a fever-pitch before falling silent, their departure causing a strangely loud silence in the Chamber, only punctuated by the sound of debris clattering against stone as the Chamber vibrated.

Riding on the tongue of fire was a grey shape, a humanoid figure spewed forth from the great black disc. It spiralled up into the air, before falling slowly downwards, like a feather, towards Harry's motionless corpse.

Slowly, gently, it grew nearer and nearer, before the smoke-like figure touched Harry's chest and vanished. The black rent vanished silently along with it; the pentacle spiral immediately stopped glowing its unearthly purple, instead reverting to its previous illustrious colours. The vibrations also ceased as quickly as they had begun, and the stench of ozone and burning settled in the Chamber of Secrets.

Then, as Dumbledore's body twitched, blood still pooling on the floor underneath his face, Harry Potter's body took a great, shuddering, breath.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Voldemort sat in his study at the Riddle Mansion, reviewing a spell he had written himself to enhance the Dementor known as Umbra's already formidable powers. As he crossed out a small error he had made, a spike of white-hot pain drove into his brain, causing him to howl in shock and hunch forward, pressing his forehead onto the cool

parchment. His vision blurred as the pain increased, and he hissed as images appeared before his eyes; Dumbledore lying face forward; a whirlpool of dark clouds over Hogwarts; the lake in a frenzied churning.

Then they were gone, along with the pain, and he couldn't remember what he had seen.

Voldemort sat back in his chair, rubbing his forehead, completely thrown as to the source of the sudden mental assault. It was as though a connection in his mind had been thrown wide open and pure electrical power had been sent directly into his brain. Possibly a result of the energies he had used duelling Dumbledore and Potter.

Cursing slightly, he continued with his note-taking, promising mentally to investigate the sudden phenomenon later.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

The sound of screaming was the only thing in his world now; loud, piercing and all encompassing, it squeezed his consciousness and pushed him out of the world of white. Harry's vision, if you could call it that, filled with different disconcerting images, bordered by multicoloured rushing lights. The screaming stopped, to be replaced with the sound of rushing wind and crackling, roaring fire.

He saw... himself, but subtly different. He looked cocky, self-assured, and as he watched wings of skeletal bone shot from this Harry's back. Instantly the image vanished, to be replaced by another. This Harry looked powerful but exhausted, but as Harry watched, the Harry in the image fired a colossal beam of fierce energy from his hands, slicing clean through a gleaming skyscraper. More images followed, of different Harry Potters he had never seen before; scarred, female, happy, sad, victorious... A final image then flashed up; that of Harry's own body, lying motionless inside an intricate glowing diagram. With a deafening burst of sound Harry felt his viewpoint pitch and roll as he was launched up into the air and then down, straight down, into the image of his body.

He took a deep, desperate breath.

[illegible]

Oh fuck, how that first breath had hurt. It was more than simply the changing of pressure in his thorax to draw air into his lungs; it was the magical power of Dumbledore's spell percolating into his bones and nervous system, jolting his entire body back into consciousness.

Harry opened his eyes, and tried to take a second breath.

He couldn't.

He was cold, so very, very cold. His mind felt like it was being squeezed and smothered, similar to the Imperius curse. He found he couldn't even move, bar his eyes. Something was commanding him, forcing him to remain perfectly still. He could only stare at the ceiling – was he in the Chamber? – and have his mind rage and rally against the oppressive feeling invading it. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't feel anything, yet he was still conscious.

What the hell had happened? Voldemort, the duel... he remembered, the last thing he remembered, was intense, searing pain along his neck. Then his vision had gone very weird and then there had been... that peace.

He heard a muffled groan from somewhere out of his field of vision. A hacking, spluttering cough followed, and he heard a mumbled sentence before suddenly the blanket of forceful persuasion that had settled over his brain lessened, but he could still feel a dull throb of oppression.

He could move. Harry rolled to one side, and found himself staring straight at the detailed spiral pattern he remembered from that crazy hallucination he had had. He paused for a moment, lying face down on the floor.

He wasn't breathing. He tried, actively, to inhale, and found he couldn't he wasn't suffocating.

What the fuck was going on.

He pushed himself up, with some effort, and managed to kneel. He was still dressed in his Phoenix uniform, the hood pushed back and the bandana missing, but he was covered in blood. Whose blood, he couldn't say.

He hunched forward, his body entirely numb after the initial jolt of pain. His memories were swimming, flowing through his perception like water; he was unable to focus on them. The damnable feeling of oppression and control was still stabbing into his mind. Clutching his head, Harry groaned at the almost drunken feeling.

"H...Harry?" he heard someone wheeze. Blearily he looked to his right to see... Dumbledore. The Headmaster was sitting up on the dusty floor, next to the spiral, and was looking ghastly. His eyes were bloodshot, his skin pale, and his beard was matted with blood, which he cleaned off a second later.

"Welcome back, my boy," Dumbledore said weakly, before coughing hard in the dusty air. Harry merely stared, mute. "Harry," Dumbledore continued after his hacking fit. "Please, Harry, forgive me for what I've done..."

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Dumbledore sat, exhausted, on the outskirts of the summoning diagram, looking quietly at Harry Potter. The boy was still a corpse-white, his green eyes shining compared to the rest of his face. He was grimacing in pain, likely a side effect of the spell Dumbledore had had to cast upon the boy. The silver stitches in his neck glistened in the dim light of the Chamber.

"What..." he mumbled, "What have you done, Dumbledore?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Harry... I had to bring you back... this was the only way."

“What have you done, Dumbledore?” Harry spat suddenly, suddenly angry. “What is this in my head?” he clutched his skull and hunched over, moaning. “Why do I feel like this?”

“Harry... you’re an Inferius.” Dumbledore said abruptly, and silence descended on the Chamber as the dust swirled and settled around them.

Harry let out a short, giggling laugh. “What, Dumbledore? I don’t think I heard you there.”

Dumbledore got to his feet slowly, and brushed off his ruined robes. “You’re an Inferius, Harry. I altered the standard Inferius creation spell to incorporate your particular... soul, for lack of a better word, into the host body. I was afraid it wouldn’t work.”

Harry didn’t look up, still hunched over. “It’s you in my mind, isn’t it.” He said flatly. “You’re controlling me, as the spellcaster.”

Dumbledore remained silent, but that was all Harry needed.

“Why?” he said. “Why have you done this to me, Dumbledore?”

Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak, but Harry immediately cut him off.

“I was happy there, Albus. I was at peace. I’ve already travelled back in time to keep fighting this fucking war, and now you’ve dragged me from the afterlife to keep me going at it, but now it’s under your manipulative control,” he snapped, looking up with a face contorted with rage. “Congratulations, now everything is under your thumb. You got the weapon you wanted.”

Dumbledore’s face fell under Harry’s tirade. Seeing this, Harry continued.

“No use looking sad now, Headmaster,” he spat, getting unsteadily to his feet. “Wow, I can stand up. Let me guess, you had to allow me to do that? I can feel you in my head. I’ve already had Voldemort do that

for years, and now it's the man I used to respect the most in the world."

"Harry, please--"

"Albus Dumbledore," Harry said quietly. "Not satisfied with playing with lives in his Order, seeks to control them."

"No." Dumbledore said darkly, and Harry paused. Dumbledore straightened himself up, shaking off the punishment of the summoning ritual. "Never assume I do this lightly, Harry. Do you think it was easy, having to locate and assemble the spellwork necessary to bring you back in one piece, or even lucid?"

"Good job you did of it," Harry said bitterly, rubbing his limbs but feeling nothing. "I'm now a walking corpse who wants to die. Top marks there."

"Be quiet!" Dumbledore barked, and Harry immediately found himself unable to speak or move his mouth. The feeling of unnatural control in his brain clamped down, dulling his senses and making him feel intoxicated. "I'm sorry to have to do this Harry, but you are being unreasonable. How can you think I play with people's lives with no thought for the consequences? I have been fighting senseless battles for years; Grindelwald and his aerial bombardments, burning children and destroying homes. The great Muggle world war; I was there when the German capital of Berlin fell and I had to duel Gellert in the streets. Now Tom, the boy I'd hoped to save, has committed atrocities not once, but twice. And I personally am powerless to stop him this time Harry. I need you to stand with us."

Harry found his mouth unstuck at a whispered command from Dumbledore. "Stand with you? I don't have a choice!" he shouted, feeling a particularly strong stab of blissful persuasion at the back of his eyes. "I can feel... I can feel your will in my mind... no..."

"Harry," Dumbledore murmured. "I said... I'm sorry. It's the only way I could think of doing this."

Harry gritted his teeth and fell to his knees, his balled fists pressed into his green eyes. He growled, and then began to yell, and Dumbledore felt a buzzing at the base of his skull.

“Harry, no!” he shouted, “Don’t try to fight-“

The buzzing rose to a dull roaring in his ears, as Harry’s yells mingled with the noise. Dumbledore, torn between trying to subjugate the boy he had forced through hell and trying to let him make his own choices, could do nothing but endure the howling blast of noise. He heard a metallic scraping sound, and the noise stopped, to be replaced by Harry’s muffled groans.

Dumbledore looked and saw the Boy Who Lived still on his knees, his hands over his face. Dumbledore frantically whispered something, but Harry the Inferius failed to respond to his master’s command.

“Harry... what have you done...” Dumbledore said in horror, as Harry’s hands slowly fell to his sides, to reveal his face. He was crying blood, his nose was also bleeding badly, and his mouth had sagged open grotesquely, with his eyes rolled into the back of his head. As Dumbledore watched, Harry began to laugh. It was a deep, mocking laugh.

“Dumbledore...” he whispered, his eyes slowly rolling back forward. They were glowing green, lighting up his stark white face with a soft light. “No one controls me.”

“Harry?” Dumbledore said quietly, his hand clasped tightly onto his wand. The Boy Who Lived got slowly to his feet, his eyes still glowing and his mouth in a wicked, sadistic grin. He giggled, a sickening sound coming from a young man covered in his own blood.

“I’m free again, Albus,” he said mockingly. “And I’ve never felt better...”

Dumbledore eyed Harry warily. He was looking Dumbledore up and down, with a disconcertingly hungry look. Suddenly his expression changed, he wore a look of puzzlement.

“Dumbledore? Why are we in the Chamber? You look like hell! I feel... I feel a bit...” he trailed off, before blinking and grinning again. “I feel great.”

Dumbledore took a step forward, but instantly Harry’s wand was in his hand and pointed at Dumbledore’s heart. “Go on old man,” he whispered. “Try it. I’m dead; you can’t hurt me with your spells. Thanks to your magic keeping me alive, I can do things your body never can. Let me leave.”

“Harry, please, don’t do anything rash,” Dumbledore said firmly. Harry looked him in the eye with his glowing orbs, and laughed again.

“What, like raise the dead and then try to control them? I think you managed to set the bar with that one, Albus. You’ve... wait... what am I doing?” he lowered his wand, looking shocked at himself, his eyes still lighting up his bloodless face. “Sorry Headmaster, I... I...”

He blinked and shook his head, as though he had water in his ears. The smile returned. “I think I need to... need to... reorganise my thoughts. Goodbye, Dumbledore.” With that, Harry reached into the pocket of his robes and plucked out a small white marble. As Dumbledore lunged forward, he tapped it with his wand and whispered an incantation, disappearing as Dumbledore grabbed at empty air.

Dumbledore stood there in the Chamber, alone. He had failed.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Kill him for crossing you.

Voldemort.

The cobbles... bouncing once, seeing Dumbledore’s face, the darkness.

The white... the screaming.

The awful feeling of control... kill him for that...

Kill Voldemort...

Harry lay, sprawled on the dusty floor of the Shrieking Shack, convulsing as his mind tossed and turned with thoughts. The strain of the dark summoning and ritual, combined with the effort of breaking the Inferius control Dumbledore had, had unhinged him.

He spat and gagged, thrashing weakly on the floorboards. Some of the stitches in his neck tore as his head shook from side to side. His hair, untidy and coal-black against the unearthly whiteness of his cheek, tossed and turned with it.

Kill... Kill who? Dumbledore? Voldemort? Everyone?

Make them pay. Pay for everything.

All my friends dead, time travel... my death... none of it is enough...

The Burrow... haven't been there in a while...

Dumbledore... meddling, manipulative... Voldemort, cruel and powerful...

And what of Harry Potter?

Who am I?

A weapon? A saviour? A figure? How can I save the world if no one saves me?

Do I even need saving?

Chosen ones do the saving.

He threw himself onto his back, and opened his eyes in a rush, taking another deep breath and feeling magical feedback course through his deadened nerves. With one final spasm, Harry Potter lay still, his

eyes fading back to his normal striking green. He lifted an arm, feeling at the silver stitches, gently fingering a spot where they had torn and thick, congealed blood was gently squeezed out onto his pale neck.

He was dead; there was no doubt about that. Yet the Headmaster's magic had brought him back to life as an Inferius. He could feel little, he couldn't breathe, his body wasn't functioning. He doubted he even needed to sleep like this. His mind swam with thoughts, like a rough sea, but he settled on one.

Kill his enemies.

Harry Potter smiled, alone in the Shrieking Shack with the morning sun shining on his colourless face through the grimy windows. His enemies' time had come. Harry Potter was not a man to give up easily. And now he had the advantage of being dead.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

He didn't know how long he laid there. The sun had brightened and then dimmed, so it was probably hours. He hadn't moved since then; he hadn't needed to. It wasn't like he needed a drink or his arms were going to go numb.

Harry's mind had finally settled. He knew what Dumbledore had done; he hated the old man for it. He was a freak, an abomination, a thing of dark magic and necromancy. Dumbledore had risked everything to bring Harry Potter back, and he had succeeded. But at what cost?

He had conjured a mirror on the ceiling and looked at himself. He'd managed to go from scarred adult to small child to young adult to walking corpse. Not a bad series of changes in half a year. His body, still splattered with his own blood, was completely white, save for some areas where blood had clotted and congealed in a dark red blotch. His eyes were the only bit of colour he had, save for his hair, which stood out against the paleness of his skin. Around his neck was fine silver stitching; the spellthread which had helped the whole

thing work despite his decapitation. Dumbledore had done a marvellous job.

Despite this, Harry still felt angry. Something had happened, something had changed. He needed... he needed to kill something, hurt someone. It was like an itch, an unbearable itch, which needed to be scratched or he was going to snap. He could feel the dark magic of the spell wrap itself around his brain and squeeze, like Dumbledore's control had done earlier. He wasn't the same as he was before, but if he tried to think about it he simply forgot what he was focusing on. It was as though the spell was trying to stop him realising he had murderous impulses.

He slowly sat up, and then eased himself onto his feet. He looked down at his body intently, and flexed his arms and knees. Nothing felt that different, except... he didn't feel any pain when he stretched down to touch his toes, no discomfort or hints that his body even had limits. Silently Harry conjured a small nail into his hand wandlessly, and pressed it against the palm of his right hand, before slowly scoring a cut down the puffy skin. The cut stood out as a dark red, almost black, but it didn't bleed. He felt nothing, and smiled broadly, tossing the nail aside and slowly licking the cut on his hand as his mind whirled and churned.

Slowly, Harry began to laugh once more. He couldn't feel pain, he didn't even feel his tongue on his flesh. Nothing could stop him now, nothing.

He looked down at himself, still smiling inanely. Change of outfit was needed, something... distinctive. He waved his hand and ended up with a deep purple robe. No, too flashy... he waved his hand again. Bright baby blue. A bit... Dumbledore. He needed something simpler than his old outfit...

He waved his hand once more and ended up on blinding, pure, white, which blended with his dead flesh. He flicked his wrist like a showman, and a mask, black as onyx, appeared in his hand in a pastiche of the infamous Death Eater masks.

Perfect.

With a giggle and a click of his heels, Harry put on his gear, gripped his wand and Apparated away from the Shrieking Shack.

It was time to get busy.

A/N: I've had a good few "WTF?" reviews and a lot of reviews bemoaning the Super!Zombie!Harry they claim the story is going towards. Never fear, Chapter 24 will reveal the precise nature of what Harry is, and show that just because you sent yourself mad to break a form of mental control doesn't mean the link is entirely gone...

Chapter 24 – The Vigilante Formerly Known as The Phoenix

The squeezing, crushing darkness of Apparition... it was more intense than normal, striking him in his mind as an almost physical attack rather than simple discomfort. He completely lost concentration in shock, and his original destination was lost. Harry arrived somewhere after a few seconds of darkness, but didn't see any of it before he pitched forward onto a grassy patch of ground. He lay there for a few seconds, feeling the deadened sensation of grass against his cold face, before he heard the gentle sounds of the seaside; gulls, ocean waves, and wind.

He raised his face out of the grass and looked forward; he was lying on the edge of some high cliffs overlooking the ocean, and it was early afternoon. The high, weak sun sparkled off of the waves, and Harry could see specks of bright colour down below over the lip of the cliffs; holidaymakers, most likely, completely oblivious of the danger the magical world was in and the fact it was approaching winter. He had no idea where he was, but it was certainly idyllic.

He sighed and rolled slowly onto his back, his mind still reeling and aching from the difficulties in Apparition. As he raised his left hand to shade his eyes against the sun – he still felt discomfort from that – he noticed his hand simply wasn't there, replaced by a deep red stump, which gently oozed congealed blood.

He had splinched himself. With a soft groan, Harry waved his wand and was rewarded by a massive feeling of fatigue and a left hand, corpse-white and swollen, hitting him in the face as it was summoned from a few feet away. He gasped at the sudden drain in energy from casting that small spell, but gritted his teeth and managed to perform the simple spell to correct the splinching. Then he flopped back, exhausted, the grass framing his pale face.

What the hell was wrong with him? He could barely perform a summoning charm, and his Apparition had taken him miles from his intended destination to the bloody coast, and he was still garbed in his white robes but his mask had apparently been lost in transit. Harry moaned gently as his mind fogged and clouded, still groggy from whatever Dumbledore had done to him. Thoughts and images, from

pleasant times with Sirius to brutal killings in the first timeline he had fought Voldemort, assaulted his consciousness, and he simply lay there, in the sun, while this washed over him.

"Are you OK?" he heard a high-pitched voice say, and a shadow fell over his face. He cracked open one eye, to see a dark shadow leaning over him. With a couple of seconds to focus, the mysterious shadow was recognisable as a little girl, her face screwed up in concern and her brown hair in pigtails. She was dressed in a flowery yellow dress, and clutching a half-melted ice cream. Something about her reminded Harry of Hermione.

"You don't look so good," she observed. A little bit of the ice cream fell onto the grass. Harry opened his mouth, and closed it again. He was in no state to carry a conversation; he couldn't even remember how to. His mind was more preoccupied on how... vulnerable the girl looked.

"Whats wrong with your neck?" she asked, forging ahead despite Harry's silence.

"I... I hurt it," Harry said croakily. He didn't move, and the little girl took a big lick of her ice cream.

"It looks like it hurt," the girl said solemnly. "Do you need help, mister?" She asked, after a short pause and another lick of the ice cream.

"I don't... I don't think you can help me," Harry said, barely able to get the words out coherently. The girl looked at him, shrugged, and sat down next to his head, looking at him with a critical eye.

"Is this yours?" she said, picking up the fallen black mask with her other hand and thrusting it at him. Harry eyed the mask, and nodded. She smiled, satisfied, and placed it on the ground next to her. "What's your name, mister?"

"Harry."

"You look sick, Harry," she said matter-of-factly. Harry merely closed his eyes against the sun, and said nothing. He couldn't even breathe properly. Half of his mind was now beginning to look upon the girl as weak, as a target. She looked... she looked like she would scream well...

No.

"Are you O.K.?" she asked again, licking her ice cream.

"No," Harry said softly, turning his gaze away from her in shame. His mind, some part of it, roared at him to get up and strike the girl down, to kill her and dance on her corpse. To relish the power he had. The other half, his better half, kept him in check. His body didn't move, it couldn't move. His little battle was raging out in his mind, but his face didn't betray it.

"So you lied before? My mum says I shouldn't lie."

"Sorry."

He opened his eyes, looking through the blades of grass along the cliff-line. How had the little girl even gotten up here? What was happening to him?

"No you're not. You're nothing." He heard the girl say, her voice deepening. With a stab of fear, Harry whirled his head back and saw the girl standing up, much taller than she had been before, with a scowl on her face. The ice cream was nowhere to be seen. As Harry watched, her face blurred in the shade from the sun, and turned into Ron Weasley's; the Ron Harry had known and fought beside.

"Look at you, Harry Potter." Ron said mockingly, not moving. Harry lay there, opened mouthed with shock. "Harry Potter. Public enemy number one. The Phoenix. The Boy Who Lived. The Chosen One. Now you're dead, but aren't allowed to rest."

"Ron?" he said weakly, raising a hand towards the figure of Ron Weasley, which was now simply a head on an undefined black shadowy body.

“Pathetic, Harry. Get up.”

“I... I can't... I can't focus... I want to hurt people.”

“Dumbledore fucked you up big time. Inferius magic... he didn't really know what he was doing when he messed with that. Reanimated your corpse all right, but didn't manage to get the mind aspect down very well, did he? You've studied this stuff, you know the risks.”

“Ron...”

“Oh shut up.” Ron said sharply, glaring down at Harry with ill-disguised dislike. His scars stood out prominently against his freckled face, and his shock of red hair shone in the autumn sun. “Get up.”

Harry closed his eyes, trying to ignore the hateful figure before him. He strained and managed to move his numb limbs, slowly clambering to his feet. Ron stood next to him, still a disembodied head on a smoky, gaseous black body. Harry looked over the edge of the cliffs, a relatively large drop onto the pebbled beach below where people were sunbathing or building sandcastles. For a moment he and Ron simply observed the sea in the distance; a tiny yacht, a windsurfer.

Harry's mind whirled and lurched as he watched, still throwing him images of disgusting savagery as he tried to block them out. Ron looked at him, silently, for a long beat.

“You know this isn't real,” he said softly.

“I don't think I know what is anymore,” Harry replied, before taking one short step and stumbling clear off of the edge of the cliff, tumbling as a black shape towards to the beach several hundred feet below.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Sirius was sitting alone in Grimmauld Place's kitchen, solemnly making himself some coffee, and keeping an eye out for the odious

figure of Kreacher, when the door banged open. He started, and looked around to see Albus Dumbledore, who looked awful.

The Headmaster's beard was singed and spotted with blood and dust, his eyes were bloodshot and wild, and his scarlet robes looked like they had been slept in; a far cry from the normal impeccable, if eccentric, turnout for him.

"Headmaster?" Sirius said, putting his coffee to one side. Dumbledore caught sight of Sirius, and his eyes welled up.

"Sirius... Sirius... forgive me..." he said plaintively, and Sirius' heart began to race with fear. What had happened to Dumbledore? He immediately pointed to a vacant seat, which Dumbledore gratefully took, and Summoned a bottle of Firewhiskey and some tumblers.

"Headmaster, are you alright?" Sirius said urgently, pouring out a generous measure of whiskey. Dumbledore looked at him solemnly.

"Sirius... I have done something terrible."

Sirius sat down opposite Dumbledore, and pushed one of the full glasses towards the Headmaster, who waved it away. Wordlessly Dumbledore made a movement with his hand and a silencing ward settled over the kitchen.

"I... Sirius... Harry was the Chosen One, the only one who could kill Voldemort," Dumbledore began, and Sirius nodded. "I... I brought him back."

Sirius dropped his glass with a bang, thankfully not spilling any of the amber liquid inside. "You did what?" he said in shock.

"I resurrected Harry," Dumbledore said simply. "I couldn't let him die and let us all go down with him..."

"What?" Sirius said, still not believing what he was hearing. "Necromancy? Dumbledore, why? Inferi are one thing, but true necromancy?"

“Please, Sirius...” Dumbledore said quietly, not meeting Sirius’ gaze. “If we cannot kill Voldemort, we cannot win this war. I did the only thing I could.”

“Without talking to anyone else, you performed one of the most sickening acts imaginable on my godson? You realise if this gets out most people will want your head, Albus Dumbledore or not.” Sirius said darkly, staring hard at Dumbledore. “We all know the tales of what happened to people like Faust who tried to do what you did; walking hungry corpses who took whole groups of wizards to defeat, and they were all insane. Nundus are almost preferable in comparison, Albus!”

“I spent time researching it... and I managed it,” Dumbledore said. “Harry is... alive, for lack of a better word.”

“Then where is he?” Sirius said, “You’ve done the deed, I need to see the fruits of this labour. What the hell have you actually done to my godson?”

“Harry is... I don’t know where Harry is.” Dumbledore admitted. Sirius looked aghast.

“Dumbledore, what? Is he sane? What did you do to him?”

“He’s... he’s an Inferius, I think. And I fear the trauma of the ritual unhinged him. Merlin... what have I done?”

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

There was several seconds of near-silence, the wind rushing in his ears as he fell head over heels into oblivion. Harry smiled, and then he hit the ground.

There was a crack, and a horrible snapping noise. Upon impact he bounced twice, rolling down the last section of incline where the cliff met the beach, and lay still, face up in the sand as a body garbed in pure white robes and leather boots, like a fallen angel. For a second no one moved, and then there were screams.

Several people ran over to Harry, and one fumbled for his brand-new mobile phone to dial 999. One holidaymaker, a tall black haired young man who assured terrified onlookers he was a paramedic, gently shook Harry.

"Can you hear me?" he said loudly. "Jesus, he looks dead already. What on earth is this stitching on his neck?"

Harry's eyes flew open, surprising the man, who knelt by his body. "Are you in pain?" the man said.

Harry thought for a moment. "No."

The off-duty paramedic winced, thinking Harry probably had spinal injuries. "Just stay calm," he said gently, before waving away interested onlookers, some of whom were taking pictures.

"I... I'm alright," Harry said, trying to get up before finding he simply couldn't. i

His arm was twisted violently underneath him, and his legs weren't responding. As he twitched helplessly he began to hear a rough buzzing sound, like a Muggle blender.

"I'd... I'd get back..." Harry said, his face screwing up in discomfort. He closed his eyes and hissed in pain, which stabbed viciously at the base of his skull. The paramedic yelled and leapt back as Harry's body jerked and bucked violently, blue and green electric sparks fizzing over his skin and his bones cracking and crunching as they were reset. Harry yelled out, and then fell still as the magical discharge faded.

"What the fuck?" someone said, and several people cried out in surprise at their cameras suddenly breaking, the various electronic parts shorting out. Harry whimpered in pain, his brain feeling like it was on fire, before he heard a voice in his ear.

"I would get out of here. Apparate."

It sounded distinctly like Ron Weasley. Harry focused, and threw his battered body to the right to trigger Apparition, vanishing into thin air in front of the Muggles. Several minutes later, Ministry Obliviators arrived on the scene, but by then Harry was long gone.

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

He arrived back where he had started, or near enough. Harry landed on his back just inside the Forbidden Forest, gasping in shock. He looked up, seeing a canopy of trees with sunlight filtering through, and Ron Weasley again.

That Apparition hadn't been so bad.

"You should be fine now," Ron said calmly, looking Harry up and down. "Magical discharge there seems to have fixed you up nicely; Dumbledore's residual magic no doubt. That man has power."

"I'm... I'm not dead?" Harry said. Ron laughed.

"Poor choice of words, there. You're dead, don't worry. But you're not disabled any more, that's for sure. Gave those Muggles a bit of a shock."

Harry's mind lurched once more, and he felt nauseous. He rolled to one side and tried to be sick, but his throat and stomach refused to cooperate, leaving him lying there with his mouth open stupidly.

"Good luck throwing up with a dead body," Ron noted with humour in his voice.

"What are you?" Harry said from the forest floor, as bugs and insects began to notably move away from him. The debris and detritus practically writhed around him as the various minute inhabitants scuttled away.

"Well I suppose you could say I'm a hallucination brought on by your extreme stress and potentially split personality," Ron said idly. "I think

I'm just you talking to yourself. Although I think you'll find I won't be around for much longer..." he smirked. "I would brace yourself."

Harry opened his mouth to ask why, before another blinding jolt of magical discharge surged through his body. He bucked and spasmed, sending leaf litter and dirt everywhere, covering himself with detritus as arcs of electricity coursed through him. After several seconds it stopped, and Harry slumped backwards, smoking slightly.

Ron shook his head with a smile, and began to fade, "As I think that sorted you out, Harry."

Harry gasped and his eyes widened. He felt a sense of euphoria, stretching from his hair to his deadened toes, blissful compared to the dull sensations his body was now producing. The homicidal and darker urges he had been feeling blew away as though they had never been, and Harry sat up. He got to his feet, and looked down. His white outfit was now decidedly dirty; he pulled out his wand and cleaned it; delighting at the return of his magical abilities and the fact he hadn't exhausted himself.

Magical build-up... he knew about residual magic; excess magical charge left over from powerful spells which released itself every so often for a period of time with random effects, until it exhausted itself. Not overtly dangerous, but very rare to happen in humans; he had experienced something similar after the battle on the Express. He supposed because he was really a corpse, it was easier for the magic to linger this time. Very good timing with the discharge, anyhow. His mind was stronger, and his body was now working; the magic had given him a kick-start.

The Inferius magic had addled his brains there, good and proper. The urges he had felt... especially when he was hallucinating the girl, disgusted him. He could still feel the dark magic, like Dumbledore's control, in the back of his mind. It was like a cancer, fuzzing up his thoughts with anger and rage. Harry had to keep that in check, it was like a conscious effort. Occlumency training was paying off, in this case.

He stretched out a hand, trying to ignore the deathly pallor of the limb compared to the verdant forest around him, and fired a Stunning spell at the nearest tree. The spell was flawless, striking the tree and disappearing in a spray of red sparks. Perfect.

Harry smiled. He was still an abomination of magic, but he wasn't crippled by that. The only disconcerting thing now was the way animals seemed to be instinctively and almost hysterically avoiding him; he could see bugs and a pair of Bowtruckles jostling for position in escaping his presence. It seemed nature didn't like Inferi.

As he stared at the undulating forest floor, he heard a snorting. Instantly on guard, Harry scanned the tree line. He glimpsed a flicker of black hair, and tensed. To his surprise, a large thestral strode out from behind a thick cluster of trees, before walking right up to Harry, staring at him unblinkingly.

"Uh... hello," Harry said uncertainly, conscious of the magical manipulation of his vocal chords; he no longer breathed.

The thestral stood in front of him, just taller than Harry was, and stared him in the eyes. Harry stood stock still, wary of the Ministry's classification of thestrals as "dangerous". After five seconds, the thestral licked him on the face, and whinnied in a distinctly friendly manner. Harry laughed, and gave the beast a pat on the head. The thestral licked him again, and then rubbed his head against Harry's hand.

After several seconds of petting the thestral, Harry saw a second thestral emerge from the trees, slightly smaller than the first. It also walked right up to Harry, with a notable lack of fear. As he watched, the first one, a large male from what he could gather, nudged him and turned its flank.

"You want me to... get on you?" Harry said uncertainly, feeling slightly stupid talking to the thestral like that. To his surprise the animal nodded discernibly, and its partner bumped its head against his back until he grabbed the first thestral's mane and hoisted himself up onto it.

Harry had ridden a thestral before, and centaurs, but this trip was far more leisurely. The wings of the beast folded comfortably beneath his thighs, and Harry was taken slowly away from the clearing, and deep into the forest by the pair of thestrals, to wherever they wanted to go.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Sirius could only sit, open-mouthed, as Dumbledore recounted his tale of dark sorcery. The old man seemed to visibly age as his crimes were laid out to Sirius, and when he had finished he sat in silence, a far cry from the usual commanding Dumbledore Sirius was used to.

“Headmaster... what are we going to do?”

“I... I honestly can’t say, Sirius. Harry is missing entirely, and I fear he is insane and still as powerful as he was before, if not more so. He doesn’t need to eat or sleep, and he probably has violence in his heart. Voldemort, on the other hand, is still very much a threat, and I fear he is going to strike at the school next.”

“Hogwarts?”

“Indeed. I need to return to the school and oversee the shoring up of defences, and keep an eye out for Harry.”

Sirius stretched out a hand tentatively, and patted Dumbledore on the shoulder. “Headmaster,” he said gently, “Don’t beat yourself up over this. We’ll find Harry, and he’ll come round. We just need to make sure this doesn’t get out into the public at large.”

Dumbledore nodded solemnly, before getting to his feet and adjusting his half-moon glasses. “Thank you, Sirius,” he said, smiling wanly. “I must confess I never thought I would find myself confiding in a troublemaker such as yourself when I had to listen to tales of woe from the staff of Hogwarts, this has been illuminating.”

Sirius nodded back. “Appearances can be deceiving, Headmaster. We just need to get Harry back.”

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Lord Voldemort was sitting in his office, with Umbra, the Dementor, by his side. Bellatrix was prostrated before him, quivering with barely concealed delight at being able to wait in the presence of her Master.

“Bella,” he said languidly, caressing his wand idly. “I need you to discover where Dumbledore has hidden himself away; he took that damnable Phoenix’s corpse and hasn’t been seen since. Once you have located him, I need you to begin to train my forces for an attack on the Ministry and Hogwarts; Muggles are expected to be included in the fighting, as in Diagon Alley. The werewolves and some vampires have joined us; treat them with courtesy while they reside in the Mansion. Additionally, I want you to oversee the procurement of some trolls; they will be useful in my plans. Our objectives are thus threefold, and once we have achieved them the purity of the Wizarding World is assured.”

“Yes... yes Master,” she said in delight, nodding vigorously from her position on the floor.

“Do not fail me in this, Bella. Remember what happened to Lucius. For now Umbra,” he gestured to the faceless Dementor, “will aid you in this. Tell your husband to also put his efforts into these objectives.”

“It will be done, my Lord,” she whispered breathlessly, shooting Umbra a jealous look from underneath her eyelashes.

“Good,” Voldemort said. “And tell the recruits from now on, its Muggle hunting season. They can do what they like in the interim, with my full encouragement.”

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Several days later...

Unbeknownst to the Mason family, who lived in a charming cottage situated just outside a village in the country of Norfolk, Albus

Dumbledore had managed to return to public life in the Wizarding World successfully. The Ministry was publically trumpeting their victory in Diagon Alley, but the situation behind the scenes was still very grim.

Voldemort's forces had been awfully quiet in the interim, until now.

It was midnight, and the cottage was dark, the four inhabitants fast asleep; two parents and two young boys. A muffled series of thumps signalled the arrival of several malevolent figures in the grass surrounding the quaint building. The white cottage was isolated, with a several hundred yard walk to the sleepy village, which was on the other side of a hill to the north. Perfect for some fun, the Death Eaters had reasoned.

There were five of them; four new recruits, eager to exercise their power over the Muggles, and one werewolf, who was looking to have some fun with the boys. They crept, as one, along the hillside, approaching the cottage as invisible wraiths. They stole along the side of the building, a thatched two story affair, and gently opened the door with an unlocking charm, before one of them skilfully froze the Muggle burglar alarm which winked innocently above the door in the old-fashioned kitchen.

It was too easy. Their friend had hung around in the local pub, scouting out the area, in preparation for the raid. He hadn't shown up at their arranged meeting spot, but the rest of the Death Eaters were too eager to wait long for him.

The werewolf and two of the Death Eaters remained in the kitchen, on guard, while the other two crept up the carpeted stairs into the upstairs area. The three in the kitchen waited with bated breath, trembling with anticipation, until they heard a strangled yell and an unnerving sound of rushing wind.

With a fearful look at one another, the two Death Eaters sprinted out of the kitchen and into the hallway, before thundering up the stairs with their wands drawn. The top floor had a landing with three doors leading off – one was open with the light turned on. The two Death

Eaters advanced slowly towards the room, wands drawn, and gasped in horror at the sight within.

Three Death Eaters were suspended in mid air by magic, hanging grotesquely with their masks ripped off and their faces bloodied by some sort of beating. All three of them were dead, their eyes glassy and their faces arranged in looks of shock. The braver of the two Death Eaters slowly walked into the room, a large bedroom with a vacant four-poster bed and an antique wardrobe against the far wall, seeing no one around. He gestured at his partner to investigate the wardrobe while he cast spells at his friends' corpses to find out what had happened to them.

The other Death Eater, a pock-marked boy of barely eighteen who already displayed the twisted sadism of a future Inner Circle member, cocked his head quizzically at the wardrobe, his masked face betraying no outward emotion. He slowly reached out for the handle, and threw the door open, brandishing his lit wand into the interior. Nothing there but coats and some dresses. He looked at the second door, which was a separate compartment from the first, and opened it casually, not expecting to find anything inside.

Inside was a man garbed in pure white robes, with a faceless black mask, the mirror of the Death Eater's own. He was hunched slightly to fit inside the empty wardrobe compartment, but his wand was pointing right at the Death Eater.

"Hello," he said calmly, before jabbing his wand forward into the Death Eater's face, causing the boy's head to vibrate violently and send him crashing to the floor, clutching at his temples in agony. The other Death Eater whirled around from his inspection of the floating bodies, but was far too slow. The mysterious figure slashed his wand downwards and sent the Death Eater staggering backwards, scrabbling at his throat as blood began to soak his robes.

Harry Potter leaped out of the wardrobe, idly kicking aside a twitching body on the floor, and smiled behind his mask. It had been too easy; he had been listening around in pubs for news of Death Eaters, and a short and violent meeting with one of the gentlemen currently floating above the ground had yielded results. Not having to sleep had its

benefits when it came to gathering information. The thestrals had also proven themselves to be almost precognitive, flying him to places where Death Eaters were planning to meet so he could eavesdrop.

He felt a cold rage at the back of his mind threaten to overwhelm him like a wave of nausea, but he viciously stamped it down. This was his first taste of combat since before his untimely death, and he had to say he was enjoying it.

Harry then swept aside the corpses and lined them up on the floor side-by-side. After a last sweep of the house he would take care of them, and then rearrange the Mason family, whom he had put into an enchanted sleep in the attic. A cursory check of the children's' room and the bathroom yielded no results, and the kitchen and living room were similarly empty. As Harry stood by the front door, giving the kitchen one last look, he heard a growling noise behind him, and was suddenly enveloped by strong arms and dragged backwards out of the front door into the cold night air.

The werewolf had snuck up on him as he checked the kitchen, and had seized him from behind. Harry was thrown to the ground and punched violently in the face; he felt no pain but knew his nose had broken with the impact. He rolled to one side, unfazed by the blow, and received a kick to the kidneys, which he ignored easily. Springing to his feet, he managed to block the third double-handed punch with his forearm armour, and fired a bright flare from his wand to light up the untransformed werewolf, a burly black-haired beast of a man, and send the monster staggering back with a whimper. He adjusted his mask before flourishing his wand, and beckoning the raging werewolf mockingly.

The werewolf ran at Harry with blind anger, and Harry merely raised his wand at the last moment, firing a large crescent-shaped green light, which scored a slash in the werewolf's chest. Harry smelt the warm smell of fresh blood, and licked his lips. He felt the cold rage smash through his mental barriers at the scent, and roared in anger, meeting the bloodied werewolf head on in a spear tackle, his wand tossed aside and forgotten. The werewolf was stopped in its tracks by Harry grabbing its shoulders, and Harry then seized its head and began to squeeze, laughing manically.

He couldn't concentrate, his vision narrowing to a single point of dim light as his body fought the werewolf tooth and claw. He could only hear snarling and whimpering, and the white-hot anger enveloped his mind. Harry blacked out.

When he regained consciousness, the stench of blood was everywhere. The cottage front door and window emitted a faint light from the kitchen, which shone weakly on the scene Harry found himself in. The werewolf was dead, with a pained look on its face, and gutted, its glistening entrails scattered over a wide area; they looked like they had been played with. Harry looked down to see himself standing covered in viscera and blood, his robes stained a deep red in places, intermingled with grass and dirt stains. He lifted his hands to his face, having lost his mask, and felt sticky hot blood coating his cheeks, with some even in his mouth. He swore and spat, revolted to see chunks of flesh fly out along with gobbets of blood. A field mouse could be seen frantically scurrying as fast away from Harry as possible; he had become used to being feared by normal creatures.

"Fuck," he hissed, feeling the deadened taste of sweet flesh on his tongue. He rubbed his forehead, feeling a blinding headache coming on. That wasn't good. He heard a muffled whinnying noise, and saw Tenebrus, the alpha thestral, trot over from where Harry had disillusioned him behind the house. Harry sighed as the thestral licked him eagerly, lapping up the hot blood. The thestrals seemed to like Inferi; their association with all things dead was well deserved.

Harry was exhausted, but knew he wouldn't be able to sleep. This fatigue went to the bones. His lack of mental control had frightened him; the rage had broken his Occlumency at the first sign of proper violence, and he had apparently even eaten some of the corpse. He found it difficult to particularly care about the werewolf, but the fact he couldn't even remember killing him was disconcerting. His Inferius instincts were pushing into the fore; his day spent alone in the Forest didn't seem to have helped him that much.

With a sigh he patted Tenebrus, picked up his fallen mask and went into the invitingly-lit house. He had a few things to do before he returned to the Forest.

Harry Potter may have been a confused soul, but that didn't mean he could slack off.

[illegible]

“Sir, I’ve analysed the magical signature from the Brighton coastline magical incident a few days ago,” a young Ministry worker said to his superior, handing over a sheaf of parchment. It was early morning, the morning after Harry’s midnight visit to the cottage, and the workers in the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes had been mainly working non-stop with Aurors to help clean up the mess from the Diagon Alley battle.

"Anyone we know?" the superior, a bald man in red-trimmed black robes said idly, flicking through the parchment. He had been incredibly busy since Diagon Alley, but had to still find time to look through the more mundane matters.

“Sir...” the worker said. “I think you’ll have to read this carefully. The signatures are confusing; they match the magical vigilante tagged as “The Phoenix”.”

“So?” the superior said, obviously not one to read the news.

“He’s dead. He was recorded as such in the Diagon Alley battle a few days ago. His magical signature is still around though, in an entirely different part of Britain, so who cast that Apparition and caused the heavy magical discharge?”

"It must be a mistake."

“Sir... I think there is a bit more to it than that. Look at this,” he pointed at a particular line of the readout, which was written in complicated Arithmancy. “This indicates Dark Magic was involved, likely Inferius-based. Whats more, I took a moment to dig up some

old files,” he pulled another sheaf of notes out of his robe pocket. “This is a reading from years ago, when there was last a recorded incident of necromancy in Britain; the monster created killed a couple of Muggles before burning out and melting. But that’s not important. This is.”

He flicked through the yellowed parchment and pulled out on in particular, placing it alongside the other readout. “Their Dark Magic readings are identical. Sir, I think we’re dealing with necromancy here. And what’s worse is that this,” he pointed at the tail end of a line of writing, “matches Albus Dumbledore’s magical signature. I don’t know what to make of it.”

The superior examined the readouts with a practiced eye. After several long minutes, he spoke.

“Come with me, Montgomery. The Minister needs to see this.”

A/N: In response to what a couple of people have said (including “Jim” the anonymous reviewer, so lamentably I can’t address him directly) – the magical signature plot line is not a plot hole. I will be addressing it in Chapter 25; for now think along the lines of fingerprint detection forcing people to use gloves a lot.

Chapter 25 – Where in the World is Harry Potter?

The Boy Who Lived Still Missing – Winda Wordswith

You Know Who and his Death Eaters are back, and they have committed atrocious acts upon the Wizarding World and Muggle Britain alike. Times are dark, and only through the bravery of the Auror corps and, surprisingly, Muggles are we able to resist the Dark Forces. But what of the Boy Who Lived, the one who ended it last time? Many considered him to be a “Chosen One” of sorts, a prophesised messiah to lead us against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named when he rose again.

He went missing following the Hogsmeade massacre, and has not been seen since. Most suspect him to be a prisoner of the Death Eaters, and nothing the Ministry or, indeed, Albus Dumbledore has said suggests otherwise. He is just thirteen, although aged in unusual circumstances, and no one seems to be lending a thought to him. He saved us last time, yet no one seems to be saving him this time.

His school friends and teachers miss him, and his adopted Weasley family say life is not the same without him. I implore the Wizarding World, as someone given her life back by the Boy Who Lived thirteen years ago, to spare a thought for a little boy trapped by the Dark forces. It is not only Aurors who do the fighting.

The Ministry Tightening Up – Shirley Temple

The Ministry of Magic is becoming worryingly draconic, say many political advisers. Reports of execution for suspected spies and random Veritaserum tests are filtering out of the now-airtight Ministry building, where visitors are now no longer allowed. After the attack on Diagon Alley, the Ministry is reported to be working closer with Muggle military and law enforcement, but this writer has to question how much this-

Scrimgeour put the newspaper down on his desk and rubbed his eyes. He had already got his first frantic reports of the morning – reports of a Death Eater attack on a small Welsh Muggle community which had left several dead, and a mysterious slaughter of Death

Eaters in Devon. An elderly Muggle had told Ministry representatives, before a memory charm, that he'd seen something that matched a thestral flying across the sky in Devon around the time of the attack.

Mysteries, enigmas. It was too fucking much on top of a war. Aurors were working around the clock to locate Voldemort's base and assassinate any Death Eaters they could. Dumbledore had vanished and only recently re-appeared, citing time spent strengthening Hogwarts' wards – people had reported strange weather patterns over the castle, which tallied with Dumbledore's story.

Scrimgeour was only one man. He had the Ministry on his side, and the Muggles behind him, but this was getting to a breaking point. The Phoenix was dead; he had known what to do. The Aurors were just a Dark Wizard catching force, not an army. At the rate this war was going Scrimgeour would have to implement martial law and use draconian measures to get results. Azkaban was gone; people's faith in the system was being shaken. The pitiful number of captives they had in the Ministry holding cells hadn't given up anything useful; the base was located under a Fidelus. He was fighting a man who could beat Dumbledore, and rallied the numerous scum of the underworld to his cause like a beacon.

And now this. Potter. He hadn't given a thought to the scar-headed hero, not really. He had had more important priorities, frankly. But now... where had he gone?

There was a knock on his office door. Scrimgeour arranged his robes, and called out for the person to enter. His secretary, an attractive petit brunette with striking green eyes, ushered in a pair of workers from the Catastrophes division. He vaguely recognised them. Montgomery and someone else, a bald man with a senior post.

"Yes?" he said curtly, the slew of papers around on his desk and his rather frazzled look attesting to a Minister who was not going to waste time.

"Sir," the bald-headed worker said, "Montgomery here analysed some Arithmancy readings from the incident on the Devon coastline the other day; a wizard who fell off of a cliff and then Apparated away."

“So?”

“So... sir, the readings match that of the vigilante “The Phoenix”, who is reported to be dead.”

Scrimgeour rubbed his chin. “Show them to me.”

Montgomery passed over the sheaf of parchment he was clutching, clearly in awe of the Minister. Scrimgeour scanned the parchment with a trained eye. “Is this correct?” he snapped. “This shows necromantic magic, Albus Dumbledore’s magical signature, and The Phoenix’s signature in the same magical trace.”

“Sir, I don’t understand the reading, I just thought you should see it. I’m the only person who’s worked on this,” Montgomery said timidly.

Scrimgeour looked harder at the parchment. “Tell me more about this ‘incident’.”

“That’s something else I thought you should know, sir. One of the Muggles present gave me a statement, I was on the scene,” Montgomery continued. “The description was of a young man with black hair, who looked completely pale with green eyes. He also had, and this is the strange thing sir, a jagged scar on his forehead. Call me crazy sir, but I would say that matches the description of-“

“Harry Potter.” Scrimgeour finished, putting down the parchment. He waved his hand, and the door locked with an ominous click.

“Gentlemen, thank you for bringing this to my attention. However...” Scrimgeour gave them a hard look, before raising a hand, “This goes no further.”

With that, he jabbed his hand forward, sending two scarlet Stunning spells from his fingers into the chests of the surprised workers. They slumped to the floor, unconscious, and Scrimgeour picked up his wand before deftly Memory Charming the two workers to erase their knowledge of the magical signatures or the description of the

mysterious gentleman from the beach. After that he knelt over them and revived them, affecting a look of concern.

“Are you alright?” he said, helping the bald man to his feet, followed by Montgomery. “You’re right, that rock was definitely cursed!” he pointed to an innocent decorative fist-sized crystal on his desk. “You’re both lucky you brought it to me and didn’t give it to the evidence teams, someone could have gotten badly hurt! I’m glad the curse inside didn’t affect you both too badly,” Scrimgeour lied outrageously, as the workers just looked dazed and stared blearily at the stone. “Thank you, gentleman, the Death Eaters certainly won’t peddle any more of these cursed artefacts on the Ministry’s watch. Take the day off, both of you.”

Montgomery mumbled a thanks, before taking the purple crystal gingerly and leaving Scrimgeour’s office. Scrimgeour’s face set hard as soon as they had left, into a mask of grim determination. He grabbed the sheaf of parchment, his mind whirring with possibilities and explanations, and threw a handful of Floor powder into his fireplace.

“Hogwarts, Headmaster’s Office!” he shouted, and stuck his head into the fire. Dumbledore was working at his desk, and looked mildly surprised at seeing the Minister’s shaggy head appear in his fire.

“Dumbledore, come to my office immediately,” Scrimgeour barked.

“Certainly, Minister,” Dumbledore said genially. Scrimgeour pulled his head out with a disorientating whirling sensation, and was joined shortly by Dumbledore, who stepped out of the green flames smartly. He dusted some ash off of his canary yellow robes, and then took a seat. He looked tired, but collected, his blue eyes ringed with some dark colouring but they still twinkled behind his half moon glasses.

“So, Dumbledore,” Scrimgeour said, crossing to sit behind his desk, still holding the notes. “What would you say if I proclaimed, right now, that I should execute you on the spot? Necromancer.”

Dumbledore perceptively stiffened, his face falling, and Scrimgeour knew, with a heavy, heavy heart, that his suspicions had been right.

Albus Dumbledore, paragon of all that was good, vanquisher of Grindelwald, had been performing Necromancy.

This was going to change things.

[illegible]

Hundreds of miles away, Harry Potter sat on a tree stump deep in the Forbidden Forest, surrounded by sleeping thestrals. He was looking at his reflection in a conjured, floating, mirror. Green eyes stood out on a pale face, his black hair sharply contrasting with his skin. His scar shone on his forehead, a thin jagged slit of red. It was just that nowadays, a scar. Hadn't bothered him since he witnessed Voldemort's demonic ritual.

He had become aware, as he flew away on Tenebrus in the early hours of the morning, that his body was beginning to... rot, for lack of a better word. One of his toes had turned an ugly black, and he had noticed the thestrals looking at him with disturbingly hungry looks. So he had spent the last few hours restoring his body to a more... fresh state, and hopefully halted the ravages of nature, however slowed they seemed to be. The thestrals had, thankfully, lost interest after that.

His nature as an Inferius had been something he had given much thought for the last few days, sitting in the clearing of the forest. Bar the thestrals it was devoid of life; Harry had quickly discovered most creatures ran from him. It seemed he was destined to be rather lonely. He had taken sneak peeks at Hogwarts, the castle gleaming magnificently against the night sky as Harry returned from his attack, but it was also tinged with loneliness.

Dumbledore... he didn't know what to think about the man. He had played with Harry's life from day one. Sending him to the Dursleys, withholding the Prophecy... this Dumbledore wasn't the same as the original Dumbledore, but things seemed to be pretty fucking similar from where Harry was sitting. He had raised him from the dead, not allowed him to rest, and forced him to continue his fight with the threat of insanity.

But he was Harry Potter, and such things just had to happen to him. He was the saviour, the man who took the hits for the team. He could still feel the cold, merciless rage at the base of his skull, like a headache that wouldn't go away. He still didn't know what he had done to that werewolf when he had blacked out. Frankly, Harry didn't think he wanted to know. He was still experiencing some periods of 'lost time', and he knew it was because he was simply going mad.

He still didn't know how his body was still going; was it Dumbledore's magic, his magic, or both? He could cast spells as well as he used to be able to, if not better now that his physical restraints were reduced. He hadn't tried fire spells yet, knowing that Inferi had a weakness to fire. He didn't particularly want to hurt himself.

He heard a rustling in the trees, and remained sitting on his stump. After a few seconds a figure emerged from the thick verdant undergrowth ringing the clearing; a palomino, blond centaur. Harry looked calmly from where he was sitting; he had assumed the centaurs would find him eventually.

"Firenze," he said quietly. The centaur froze, and Harry spotted a spear was strapped to its back.

"Harry Potter," Firenze said, looking wary. "We meet again."

Harry ran a hand through his hair wearily. "Things change, don't they?"

"Harry Potter, what are you?" Firenze said skittishly, still standing on the edge of the calm clearing. The thestrals didn't stir, familiar to the centaurs. Firenze's eyes darted to look at them, and then at Harry. "Why do you camp with these cursed beasts?"

"I'm quite a lot of things, Firenze. I'm the Chosen One, I'm a fighter, I'm dead. I don't think I even know what I'm supposed to be doing any more."

Firenze blinked in surprise. "Dead? You are a... a Gith'lak? What do wizards call it... an Inferius?"

Harry nodded, a small smile on his face. He stretched out his arms wide. "Harry Potter, the one and only. On the run from Voldemort, the Order, Dumbledore and the Ministry. Not even nature wants to hang around with me any more."

Firenze looked profoundly troubled, and still remained on the edge of the clearing. "You are an Inferius... yet you retain your mind."

Harry's face twisted in mock thought. "Well... I wouldn't say retain, I've had some bouts of murderous insanity."

Firenze remained silent, still looking decidedly wary.

"The thing is," Harry said, looking at Firenze intently. "I need to know something."

"What do you need to know, Harry Potter?"

"Can I trust you, the centaurs?"

"Trust the centaurs?"

"When it comes down to it, when this all kicks off, when Voldemort and I finally have our showdown, again, will the centaurs help us out if necessary?"

"I... I don't know, Harry Potter. Bane is against humans, he is very persuasive-

Harry gave him a hard stare. "Does no one care about the Wizarding World? It's your world too. Why won't you fight for it? Why won't you..." he frowned, and his neck twitched like a nervous tic. "Why won't you... fuck. You're... are you trying to threaten me with that spear? Do you want a fight?" he growled and twitched again, and closed his eyes in frustration. "What?"

"I..." Firenze looked worried at Harry's strange behaviour. Harry blinked hard, rubbed his forehead, and shook his head sharply.

“Wait... I got it. Shit, sorry, I’ve got it. Stand by us when it comes down to it, Firenze. Just... think about it.”

Firenze frowned, looked like he was about to speak again, and then simply nodded, before walking slowly back into the forest. Harry stared at his retreating back, before resuming his meditative observations in the smooth conjured mirror.

[illegible]

“Rufus, I-“ Dumbledore began, his voice weary.

“Albus,” Scrimgeour cut across him. “I need to know. Have you performed necromancy? Have you brought the Phoenix back to life?”

Dumbledore sighed, and sagged, visibly aging in front of Scrimgeour. “Yes,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. Scrimgeour closed his eyes, absorbing this information.

“Albus, you’re now officially an enemy of the state, you realise that? I should, by all rights, kill you right now, or, failing that, forcibly detain and blind you to incapacitate you. After Faust’s disastrous experiments... necromancy was outlawed for a reason. No good has ever come of it! What have you done?”

Dumbledore looked down, his aura of control withered. He wasn't even able to make eye contact. "I took the Phoenix's corpse, and I resurrected it using a copy of Faust's old grimoire and Inferi-summoning rituals. I managed to bring the Phoenix back, but he was... unhinged."

Scrimgeour rubbed his temples. "The Phoenix... you've been lying to me, Albus. You said Harry Potter was kidnapped in Hogsmeade."

Dumbledore held his head in his hands, the aura of secrecy he had carefully maintained between the Order and the Ministry crashing down around him with an almost audible devastation. “Harry Potter is, indeed, the vigilante known as the Phoenix.”

“So, to have a brief summary, Harry Potter is a thirteen year old murderous vigilante who went wand-to-wand with the most powerful Dark Lord possibly ever, and was killed. You resurrected him as a possibly unhinged Inferius, and now he is at large. Waving aside the no doubt fascinating part of this which tells me how Potter managed to get so proficient, you’ve been lying to me from day one.”

Dumbledore sighed, and nodded, still looking at Scrimgeour’s desk. Scrimgeour lent back in his chair, and looked hard at the silver crown of Dumbledore’s head. “I don’t know, Albus. I really don’t. This is too much for me, and for you, by the sounds of it. Start from the beginning, and tell me who is in on all this. I need to know who I can trust.”

“Alastor Moody, Minerva McGonagall, Severus Snape, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black –“ Scrimgeour boggled slightly at that name – “Lord Voldemort and myself are the sole people, yourself excluded, who know of Harry’s true nature and identity.”

“His true nature? I assume you don’t mean the fact he’s the walking dead.”

“No, although Mr. Black knows of that. I refer to the fact he is a time-traveller.”

Scrimgeour’s eyes widened. “So, to add to this list, you’re harbouring a mass murderer as well? And Harry Potter is a time traveller? Merlin, Albus, I thought this deception was like an unsteady house of cards, but it’s more like the bloody Hogwarts Castle of card structures!”

Dumbledore sighed again. “I’ve been keeping a lot from you Rufus, I really have.”

“You can bloody well say that again!”

“Harry Potter is a time traveller; he comes from a future where Voldemort won a war not dissimilar to the one we currently fight. He was the sole survivor of a meagre resistance, at the age of twenty five he was sent back into our current timeline in a complex Time-Turner accident. Since then him and I, and the Order of the Phoenix,

have been working to fight Voldemort. We have destroyed several potent methods he employed to keep himself immortal, and now are waiting to strike the killing blow. In addition, Sirius Black is an innocent man, something which Cornelius refused to recognise when we presented proof."

"This is quite a tale, Albus, but that doesn't explain why you felt the need to dabble in the darkest of magics! The boy was dead, why did you need him?"

"A prophecy involving him and Voldemort details that one of them needs to kill the other."

Scrimgeour paused to think for a moment. "And this prophecy still applies, despite it being technically fulfilled?"

"I cannot personally verify this, as no one has ever been able to hit Lord Voldemort with a Killing Curse to check, but the fact that Harry is the only man to ever almost kill Voldemort on more than one occasion means that we would need him regardless. His fighting skills are formidable."

"What about the International Confederation? Have you tried appealing to them? They didn't help us before, but you're the Supreme Mugwump, for Merlin's sake! Why did you feel the need to go immediately to the extreme solution?"

"I...I did what I thought was right," Dumbledore said lamely. Scrimgeour looked at him sadly.

"Maybe it's time you tried to stop saving everyone single handed, Albus. You were the hero of the world when you stopped Grindelwald, you didn't need to take it upon yourself to fight this war like it was your own. From the sounds of it, it was more Potter's than yours."

Dumbledore looked up, looking uncharacteristically vulnerable. "I had to do something, Rufus. I had to watch children burn and die in front of me when Gellert was running around London on his sprees; I would do anything to stop that again. But what have I done to Harry? The boy is insane... I fear I've done more harm than good."

Scrimgeour patted him on the arm. "Well Albus, at least I know where we stand now. I suggest our overarching strategy be, simply, the death of You Know Who. We focus everything we have into locating his base, and then we kill him. Potter can decide where his allegiances lie when the time comes."

Dumbledore nodded. "The Order has pinpointed several locations, but the Fidelus charm makes things difficult. Although from the sounds of things all is not well with Voldemort's forces. Lucius Malfoy is dead; I assume you heard the news. It gave Master Malfoy quite the shock."

"Frankly, Albus, I just think "one down" when I hear news like that. And don't think you're getting away with whatever you did to Potter. I just don't think I can afford to have an enemy like you right now."

"I agree Rufus; I think I'll have to answer for a lot when all this is over. The masses do enjoy venting against those who protect them. One day I'm a hero, the next I'm a 'bumbling coot'."

"Well, Skeeter never was the most impartial of judges. In this case, however, I think she'd be right in assassinating your character."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair wearily. "What character I have left. War makes us do horrible things."

"You're telling this to the man who ordered the death of a decent proportion of the Ministry, who were spies."

"I just pray that history will forgive us."

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

"What news, Bella?" Riddle said, looking up from his notes to see a prone LeStrange in front of his ornate desk.

“My Lord... the word in the drinking houses is that the Ministry is trying to divine the location of the Riddle Mansion, and are focused on killing you.”

“I see,” he said, scribbling out another note. “How are the Death Eaters?”

Bellatrix kept staring at the ground, not daring to look up from the flagstone floor. “My Lord, they are almost prepared for an assault on the Ministry of Magic. We have recruited more dark creatures to the cause, foul abhumans, but useful nonetheless. Dumbledore resides at Hogwarts now; we would need to breach the castle first.”

“Laying siege to Hogwarts... no one has ever done it.” Voldemort said softly, looking at Bellatrix with an unreadable expression. “Notrox tried and failed in the 17th century, and Vigint before him in the 1400s. No enemy force has conquered its walls. I am asking you, as my lieutenant, are our forces sufficient?”

“My Lord, there is a way...”

“Tell me, Bellatrix.”

“Hogsmeade village has been burned to the ground. Dirty Muggles infest the area in a military encampment, but one of our scouts has told us of a pair of magical passageways leading out from it. One is a solid tunnel, running underneath the building known as the Shrieking Shack, and covered by a vicious Whomping Willow. The second is wholly magical in nature, and previously existed between an unknown location in Hogwarts and the pub called the Hog’s Head.”

“Aberforth’s establishment...” Voldemort said thoughtfully. “What has happened to this passageway? I assume it was a form of teleportation spell. Dumbledore liked to keep in touch with his brother. He now likely considers it to be destroyed.”

“Yes, my Lord. We have analysed some of the Arithmancy from a distance and found it to be a modification on the spells used on the Floo network, probably originating from a fireplace or portrait. With some work we could create a second entrance to this passageway

and enter it ourselves. The Muggles would need to be slaughtered beforehand.

“Excellent, Bellatrix. You have done well. I am currently working on methods of disabling the Ministry and Hogwarts wards. Inform me when our forces are prepared.”

“My Lord, there is just one more thing,” Bellatrix said tentatively, still not raising her eyes to look at Voldemort.

“Yes?”

“The Death Eaters, with your grace, have been conducting raids on Muggle establishments. Five Death Eaters and a werewolf were found nailed to a brick wall inside a Muggle village in Devon. They had been brutally slain.”

“I see. I will look into this, Bella. Do not let rumour run rampant in the ranks. The Phoenix is dead, and Dumbledore will be next.”

Bellatrix mumbled some platitudes, before slowly backing out of the study on her hands and knees. Voldemort re-inked his quill and continued writing, consulting a hefty tome every so often.

Things were progressing. With Potter dead, despite his powers remaining a mystery, nothing could stand in Voldemort’s way. The British Isles would be his, and then he would begin his rule.

Ooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Severus Snape had found himself under a lot of strain in recent days. The Dark Lord’s pall of suspicion hung heavy over the Riddle Mansion, and breaking the Fidelus on the place was proving impossible – Voldemort made a point to confound any Death Eaters when they left the house, meaning that Snape didn’t even know what it was called, let alone a rough location.

At present he was stalking out of the castle doors, on the way to a small apothecary near Manchester, to procure some potion supplies.

On a personal level, Snape was frankly defeated. Potter was gone, and although he never thought he would admit something like that, he wished the boy had survived. Without him, without "The Phoenix", they were all dead men. And Snape had given up too much to be resigned to death just yet. Yet life went on; nothing was ever accomplished by just giving up.

He strode down the path towards the dark castle gates, and Apparated once he crossed the tingling ward boundaries. Within an instant the cool dark night air of Hogwarts, for it was early evening, was replaced with a distinctly colder biting chill. England was not pleasant that evening.

He was in a small wood, a copse of sorts, next to the apothecary building, a small ramshackle affair reminiscent of the pitiful Weasley domicile. Snape looked around, dusted himself down, and prepared to move out of the trees towards the shop when he heard the pop of Apparition behind him. He whirled, wand in hand and a curse on his lips, only to be met with a powerful blow to the face. His vision exploded in a burst of white and pain, and he fell to the ground with a yell.

His nose had taken the worst of the punch, and blood spurted out over his lips and sallow cheeks, staining his hair and the muddy earth he lay upon. Standing over him was a figure garbed in pure white, with a black mask for a face.

"Hello, Snape," the figure said, and grabbed Snape by the throat, lifting him out of the dirt with surprising strength before turning and slamming him into a tree.

Snape spat, scrabbling at the iron grip around his throat as the tree bark dug into his back and blood began to congeal on his face. His wand lay in the detritus on the forest floor, out of his reach. The figure cocked his head, the black mask betraying no emotion, and waved his free hand, conjuring thick black ropes which bound Snape tightly to the tree. The figure then released Snape's neck, and with a flourish removed the black mask, to reveal a face Snape never thought he would see again.

“Potter?” he said with a strangled cry, for once caught entirely off guard and inhibited by the pain from his nose.

“Like I said, hello Snape,” Harry said, his bloodless lips quirking up in a smile. “You and I are going to have a little chat.”

Snape looked entirely lost for words, his sallow face contorted in confusion, pain and anger as he struggled against the bonds keeping him in place. His bleeding nose began to subside, the blood dripping absently onto the front of his black robes.

“I have just three questions, don’t worry,” Harry said, twirling his wand idly. “Where is Voldemort keeping his forces, what are his plans, and what is Dumbledore planning to do about it?”

“How are you even talking to me Potter?” Snape snarled. “This is a trick! Polyjuice, or a glamour.” Harry just blinked, and his head twitched oddly, as though he had a severe tic.

“Look at me.” Harry said quietly, as Snape scanned the forest floor frantically for his wand. “LOOK AT ME!” he roared, backhanding Snape viciously across the face as his green eyes flared with awful light.

Snape reluctantly met Harry’s eyes.

“This is what your great headmaster has done to me,” he hissed. “Legilimens”

Snape’s eyes widened, he gasped, and he saw.

Oooo
ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooO

Harry tutted as Snape fell unconscious after scant minutes of the Legilimency connection, the man’s mind and excellent Occlumency overwhelmed in his current state. The revelations Harry had forced through the connection pertained mainly to Dumbledore and his attempted subjugation of Harry, but the emotional charge behind them had made the result a bit... overbearing.

Kill him?

No.

He gritted his teeth, forcing down the urge, before he vaguely fingered the stitching on his neck, his wand delicately playing over Snape's features and probing the man's mind. Harry found layers of powerful charms, Voldemort's work, concealing memories for when Snape was outside of the Death Eater hideout, which turned out to be...

The Riddle Mansion.

Excellent. Voldemort hoped to hide the rough location of his fortress when his minions were not in or around it, although the Fidelus meant the location would be worthless anyway to most wizards.

With some more mental probing, Harry discovered vague overheard plans and – naughty Snape, he thought – stolen documents from Bellatrix's quarters detailing a two-pronged attack on the Ministry of Magic and Hogwarts.

Merlin. Things were rattling out of control. He had only been in this timeline less than six months and already Voldemort was making his move on Hogwarts again. Although... last time he had had more of an element of surprise, and the damnable magical focusing artefact which allowed him to destroy Hogwarts' wards. Harry doubted Voldemort had had time to venture to South America to loot the same ruins he had the previous time, so this attack would have to be different...

Snape moaned and snorted, blood flying in thick strings from his bruised nose. Harry was started out his reverie, and quickly brought his wand around in a series of loopy movements, healing Snape's nose and applying a powerful memory charm to cover his tracks; at the rate things were going it wouldn't matter what Snape remembered, but it wouldn't do to tempt fate. He released the man from his bonds, and gently placed his wand in his hand before artistically arranging a rock and spreading some of Snape's blood onto it to create the

illusion of an Apparition mishap. It would have to do. When Snape regained consciousness Harry would be long gone.

He picked up his discarded jet-black mask, rearranged it, and paused, checking to see if he had left anything behind.

Kill him.

No.

He shook his head violently, his mind fogging as the smell of blood reached his nostrils, the sensation muted by the spellwork supporting his dead body.

He gave Snape one last look before Apparating away.

He just hoped his identity was still a secret to all but Dumbledore. He had plans.

Chapter 26 – Reconciliation

Grimmauld Place

“Hello again, Peter,” Dumbledore said calmly, entering the concealed doorway into Peter Pettigrew’s highly warded cell on an upper floor of Grimmauld Place. The unwashed Animagus jumped and cowered away from Dumbledore, cringing in his stumpy chair which was propped next to his bed. A half eaten tray of food lay discarded on the floor. Pettigrew was thinner than when he was first captured, but the stress of incarceration and constant anti-Animagus warding affecting his body had yet to emaciate him like an Azkaban prisoner. It would probably eat away at him in due time; Pettigrew was not as strong as Sirius was.

“Dum... Dumbledore!” he squeaked, not meeting the man’s eyes.

“I haven’t been to see you for weeks, Peter. I just came here to tell you a few things,” Dumbledore said with a distinctly forced politeness, before his expression darkened. “Harry Potter is dead.”

Peter flinched physically at Dumbledore’s tone, and his blue eyes watered under Dumbledore’s withering stare. “I would have said,” Dumbledore shook his head sadly and began again, “... I would have said, when you were eleven years old and being attacked by boys older than yourself and Sirius, Remus and James came to your rescue, that a friendship like that would never have broken. I know you were the outcast, everyone did, but they accepted you and sent you through school with nothing but happy memories. And now you sit here, while the son of one of your best friends, whom you betrayed, is also dead. Sirius and Remus would have me throw you to the proverbial wolves, Peter, and it is only my wish that proper justice be done for once that stays my hand.”

Peter stole a look at Dumbledore, and saw the man was haggard and older than he usually looked; something was putting pressure on him, although the death of Harry Potter would do that to a man...

“The other thing I came here for was, frankly, information.”
Dumbledore said quietly. “Please sit on the bed, Peter.”

Pettigrew looked hesitant at first, but something in Dumbledore’s eyes brooked no argument. There was sadness there, but also a finality that showed all other options had been exhausted, and hard decisions were now having to be made.

“Dumbledore... I,” Peter began lamely, but trailed off before he could really begin. Dumbledore looked at him once more, and sighed heavily. Evidently Pettigrew was not about to have a fit of redemption.

“Goodbye, Peter. Legilimens!”

Fear, so much fear. Fear of the mighty mage before him, of the Dark Lord, for his own life.

Always his own life.

Sirius, Remus, James... compassion was nice, friendship even more so, but their lives weren’t worth his own. He wanted to survive this one.

Dumbledore pushed roughly past the surface emotions, looking deep in Pettigrew’s eyes. The man was spread-eagled, flat on his back, on the bedspread, as Dumbledore stood before him.

The first war... Voldemort approaching him with an offer... the Dark Lord telling him his base was... his base was... Dumbledore forced his way past a thick veil of charms and concealment, forcing painfully into Pettigrew’s mind with a regretful mental shove.

The Riddle Mansion.

It was a start. Dumbledore knew the mansion was in Little Hangleton, next to a graveyard. Harry had told him of something he had experienced, some sort of ritual in the graveyard. Breaking the Fidelus however, was going to be difficult, if not impossible, and the

additional wards Voldemort would no doubt put in place o the mansion could mean a myriad of dangers surrounded the place.

Severus knew he had powerful charms placed on him to conceal some of Voldemort's most important information, and Dumbledore couldn't break these charms without risking reducing his most important spy to a vegetable. Unfortunately for Pettigrew, this didn't matter particularly if it happened to him.

With a flourish, Dumbledore removed his mental probe. Pettigrew took a shuddering breath, and failed to move, a thin line of drool trickling from the corner of his mouth. He stared straight ahead, blinking abnormally little, as Dumbledore watched.

"Who would have thought the mischievous Marauders would come to this?" he said to himself, before gently levitating Pettigrew, who seemed quite absent mentally, to lie down on the bed. Pettigrew sighed again, a bubble of spit forming and popping on his face, flecking him with saliva. Dumbledore gave him one last look, and left. The House Elves would keep him alive.

Dumbledore had his information.

The day after Harry had gotten the information he needed from Snape, and the evening of Dumbledore's visit to Pettigrew, he sat in the Forbidden Forest looking at the emerging stars. The Centaurs had yet to talk to him again, and he had been simply sitting planning in his deserted clearing, with only the thestrals for company.

He had been 'losing' more and more time since he had interrogated Snape... he had just snapped at the man when he saw him face to face, even though he held no grudges. That had been a blackout moment, and when he had come to he had found himself back in the Forest somehow knowing the Riddle Mansion was Voldemort's headquarters. It was as though the magic in his body was simply doing what it was designed to do, whether his consciousness agreed or not.

He sat on his tree stump, cross-legged, and craned his neck back. He was lonely, desperately so. Ron and Hermione were within walking distance, in Hogwarts, as was Dumbledore, but they might as well have been on the moon. Ron and Hermione were young and annoying, and Dumbledore had broken him mentally and raised him from the dead in a sick ritual.

But was the old man that bad? Harry had first thought reconciliation would be impossible with the man, after what he had done, but he had been dwelling on it more and more.

He blinked and felt a wave of dizziness overcome him, followed by white hot rage. With a forced swallow he stamped it down, trying to ignore the odd sensations accompanied by the magic animating his body clumsily manipulating his musculature. He closed his eyes and heard a voice in his ear.

“Things are pretty fucked now, mate,” Ron said grimly. Harry’s eyes flew open and he saw Ron standing awkwardly on the grass, studying him. Harry noticed Ron’s legs went clean through a slumbering, snoring, thestral, as though he was a ghost.

“I like what you did with Snape,” Ron continued, twisting his scarred face into a smile and running a hand through his cropped hair. He was dressed in a plain back Muggle shirt and black trousers, and looked unusually smart and incongruous with his battle-scarred adult visage. “Following him from the Forest and nailing him with a tracker spell as he Apparated, not bad. You went a bit mad getting the information from him though.”

“I... I don’t know what happened to me, Ron,” Harry said, a note of desperation in his voice, needing to talk to someone. “I... I get so angry, and I think I fucking ate a werewolf when I disrupted a raid. What the hell is happening to me?”

Ron looked him up and down. “You know about Inperi, so I know about Inperi. You are partially one at the very least - you fear fire – tried to see what happens there by the way? – and you are driven by a murderous urge to kill and do the bidding of your master. You broke

the bidding thing; you snapped Dumbledore's attempted control. I would cut the man some slack; he was backed into a corner. I doubt he was aiming all along for this to happen, I bet he was doing Horcrux research to make you one, and your death forced his hand."

"How does this help me, Ron? I... I don't know what to do!"

"Calm it, mate. You're an Inferius, or were resurrected using elements of the spellwork to make them. You're going a bit loopy because of that, I reckon. I have no idea how to stop it. I wouldn't say you're insane, just randomly driven to violence while your 'normal' side moderates it and resists. You're not a bad person, Harry. Magic is stronger than willpower in this case. You've been conditioned to be like this from the ritual. "

"That's the thing, Ron," Harry said quietly, looking at the stars from his sitting position. "I think I am a bad person. Look at me. I murder Death Eaters without a second thought and use spells that would lock me up; I've left my life behind, both literally and metaphorically. The Weasleys' think I'm dead, so does Hermione, and I've ostracised the Order and Dumbledore from my life. I think I just have to keep going to the end because I've lost sight of the beginning. I don't even know what kind of person I am anymore. I remember back when I was fifteen and Sirius' opinion of me mattered so much to me... I think I never really got over stuff like that. What the fuck would my parents think of all this? I used to be pretty damn happy, back in the old days. Now it's just killing and killing, and even dying, for people I've never met."

"This time travel business..." Ron said sadly, "it isn't all it's cracked up to be. You have the knowledge to save the world, but it just puts the pressure on you even more. But isn't that what Harry Potter does? Save the world? You spent five years doing it, it's only been, what, a month and a bit since this conflict started this time around? I think it's nearing its end, mate. You know where the bastard is, go smoke him out. You're Harry fucking Potter. Sorry mate, but you're the only one who can end this, so you have to take the shit until you do."

“I know,” Harry said. “I know. But I’m also a fucking zombie who can’t keep a lid on his own actions. I feel a bit of Dumbledore inside my head. I can feel the control; I can feel the anger of being an Inferius. I can feel the fear of fire, the mind numbing paralysing terror associated with heat and flame. I don’t even know if I can fight a proper battle, Ron.”

“Well you seem to be able to talk to yourself about it pretty well,” Ron said jovially, smiling at Harry. “Just hold it together, mate. People here aren’t who you used to know back in our old timeline, you’ll just have to keep calm and carry on. Harry fucking Potter mate, Harry fucking Potter. You just have to keep going. The fact you’re talking about it to me is proof of that; I’m not even real.”

“I’ll just have to keep going. Don’t I always?” Harry said bitterly, before shaking his head and looking away from the stars to see Ron had vanished. Harry carefully hopped off of the stump and picked his way through the thestrals, heading for the direction of Hogwarts in the still night air.

Dumbledore was his biggest potentially ally in this. It was time to make amends.

Albus Dumbledore was sitting in the Headmaster’s office, working. Not administrative work; broom orders, Argus’ incessant demands for student torture, finances, none of that. He was working on Arithmancy for the Hogwarts wards, and for the Hogsmeade ruins and the Muggles camped there. The war was not going to end with a whimper, Dumbledore knew that much. First it had been the Express, then Hogsmeade, then Diagon Alley... Voldemort was being brash, bold, and frankly successful. People were scared; the Ministry was having to crack down as hard as was reasonable to keep order. Without the Muggles they probably would have lost the Alley entirely.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose with a sigh, trying to ignore the biting doubt about Harry Potter. The Chosen One was still a probably-insane Inferius, roaming Merlin knew where. Dumbledore had had to accept his decision and make peace with himself over it, but it didn’t

mean he wasn't worried about Harry. But he had made his choice, and had to carry on with what he had.

Such was the nature of war, really.

He paused and wrote out a complicated line of runes and numbers, designed to provide a way to boost power from Hogwarts' wards to defences in Hogsmeade if necessary, but was jolted out of his academic reverie when an intricate device on a shelf behind him began to whistle. Dumbledore whirled round in his chair, looking over his half-moon glasses at the device, and frowned. It was a small brass sphere mounted on a brass tripod, with an opening the size of a penny on the top. Normally it just sat on his shelf like a curio, but today it was performing its function as a warning for the Hogwarts ward system in the Forbidden Forest – the wards did not stretch that far into the Forest, but it was still useful. The Apparition and Unplottable wards went a reasonable distance, but the detection wards were more towards the fringes of the forest, to prevent endless false alarms from creatures that dwelled within.

So something had breached the wards at the edge of the forest... the ward-warner now began to emit a snow-white jet of steam along with its whistling, and Dumbledore got to his feet, drawing his wand with a flourish. He pointed it at the ward-warner, which was nestled between other oddities and devices on the shelves lining Dumbledore's office, and levitated the smoking machine onto his desk.

"Show me," he said sharply, brushing his papers aside to make room for the tripod as it settled on the desk. The smoke issuing forth warped and billowed, before settling into a humanoid cloud, which was simply standing still.

So, one person then.

Dumbledore inspected the amorphous cloud for a few more seconds before striding to the window of his tower-top office, to see the grounds below. There, beyond the Lake, on the fringes of the Forbidden Forest, was a figure. Even from this distance and at this point in the evening it was hard to mistake a man in white robes with black hair.

Could it be...?

Dumbledore whistled, and Fawkes the Phoenix exploded onto his perch in a ball of fire and feather, with a shrill warming trill.

“Fawkes, let us go.”

Harry stood on the edge of the Forest, looking firmly at the Headmaster's tower of Hogwarts, one of the few lights on in the slumbering castle. He had felt the wards detect him with a warm buzz, one of the few things he could feel these days. Sure enough, within minutes, there was a burst of light and fire, with a feeling of rushing warmth in Harry's cold body. Albus Dumbledore stood in front of Harry, with Fawkes the Phoenix on his shoulder and the Lake stretched out behind him. He was dressed in, for him, simple robes; navy blue with silver trim. He also looked exhausted, and relieved to see Harry.

For the first few seconds they simply stared at each other, before Fawkes let out an uncharacteristic hissing cry, and vanished in his more customary fire-filled fashion. Dumbledore frowned at that, and several more increasingly uncomfortable seconds passed before he finally spoke.

“I'm sorry, Harry.”

Harry remained silent, his eyes boring into Dumbledore's, oddly pronounced against the pasty white of his face.

“I...” Dumbledore began, and rubbed his forehead with exasperation. “I... did what I thought needed to be done, no matter how terrible it was. This is a war, and peace is within our grasp now; peace like a lot of us have never known.”

Harry's face twisted into a smile. “Well it looks like, with the way things are going, I won't get to enjoy the peace I'm forced to fight for.”

His smile, at first mildly mocking, changed into a scowl. "I can feel you, Dumbledore. You have done something to me, I just... I can feel you in my mind, like a cancer, eating away at my self control..."

Dumbledore looked mildly alarmed at Harry's suddenly change of countenance, but remained silent as Harry's scowl turned into a grimace of pain. "My senses are dulled, but my mind remains as sharp as ever, Dumbledore. I know what's happening to me now. I'm going insane, and it's because of you, Dumbledore. Because of you. You ripped me from my resting place because you couldn't take Voldemort on yourself, no one else could. Why couldn't you have just let me die?"

"Harry, I-"

"Stop giving your bloody excuses!" Harry shouted, his eyes flashing with dark rage, and an unnatural wind playing with his hair and robes. "I find myself on my own, with only the fucking thestrals for company, as nothing else can apparently abide being near me. I have no one now, and it's thanks to you, Dumbledore. But, in a bit of funny irony, I can't rely on anyone else for help. It looks like I'm going to have to fight once more, dancing on the puppet strings. You claimed, when I first came to this time, that you weren't the man I had grown up with first time around. Well you're wrong."

Dumbledore remained silent, looking sadly at Harry, who was now shaking with rage, his white robes billowing with the excess power he was giving off, like a heat haze. "My dear boy-"

"Don't pull the fucking act," Harry spat. His face was still bloodless, despite his anger, and his eyes were shining brightly with a green light. "Just..." he paused, holding his head with his left hand for a moment, as though confused. "Just..."

"Harry?"

"Just fuck off, Dumbledore. Don't try to claim you're the pure white knight of the Wizarding world who can do no wrong. You were their saviour fifty years ago, with Grindelwald. And I know they're a bunch

of fucking incompetent morons who can't save themselves, so it's up to you again. But don't try to justify what you've had to do with your morality tales. As long as we're clear with that, I might be able to work with you. Face up to the fact, publically, for once your damned life, that you've fucked up majorly and have to roll with it."

"I..." Dumbledore's face sagged, and he sighed heavily, his arms limp by his side as Harry's eyes flashed dangerously, glowing as the ancient force of the Inferius came to the fore as he visibly shook with anger. "I know you're right, Harry, I know. But I fear you are being too hard on me, to be blunt. I've simply done the best I can."

The light in Harry's eyes faded, and the wind ruffling his robes began to die down. "I know, Dumbledore. I know. It's just... I'm not who I was. I can feel the magic in my head, and it's hard to keep it under control..." he grimaced, "I'm sure you heard about Devon?"

Dumbledore nodded sagely, still looking worn out. "Indeed. Harry, I had no idea the magic would have this effect on you. I had intended to try to find a way to break the mental conditioning which came with the spellwork, and I was frankly impressed when you broke it. Although, it was probably ultimately for the best, as I'm unsure I would have been able to fully free your mind."

Harry laughed, a harsh bark. "You think too much, Dumbledore. You need to take a step back, try to not do things simply for the "greater good", or whatever it is you try to justify yourself with. Or you'll end up doing something like this," he gestured at his body and abnormally white face, "again."

"We just have to do what we can with what we're given," Dumbledore said with a heavy voice.

"I know, I know. How did this whole mess even start?" Harry said quietly, looking over Dumbledore's shoulder at the lake, which was as smooth as a mirror in the darkness, silently reflecting Hogwarts Castle on its surface. "How did we get here? I'm an undead time-traveller, fighting Voldemort again."

Dumbledore gave a small chuckle, "Magic, Harry. I remember when you were eleven years old; it was only two years ago. Oh you would have never believed what was going to happen."

Harry smiled slightly, a true smile, as he remembered. "You told me when I was eleven that you didn't like Bertie Botts' Beans,"

"I still don't, after all this."

"Some things never change, eh? So," Harry clapped his hands together, looking hard at Dumbledore, framed by the tall trees of the Forest, "how are we going to kill Riddle? I've got some ideas, but I think first I'll need to hear yours."

Dumbledore stroked his beard, looking up at the sky, to the twinkling stars. "I won't deny I've given it some thought. Where are you staying in the forest? We can discuss matters there."

"Follow me."

"It's been, like, two weeks. Is anything actually going to happen here?" said one of the soldiers stationed at Hogsmeade to his patrol partner. The partner just sighed and shrugged, knowing full well his friend was highly impatient and would say the same even if they were killing things daily.

In all honesty, the signs were pointing towards a shit posting in this part of Scotland. True, the magic stuff had been very interesting, and the equipment they had been issued was, well, magical, but frankly two weeks of being camped in some shallow valley which was just burned ruins wasn't that interesting. It beat Ireland, but frankly that wasn't saying much.

Most of the soldiers and policemen that made up the Magical Pacification unit posted in Hogsmeade were uncomplaining; their commander was a notoriously unforgiving fellow, and it was pretty easy pay so far. But the tensions were mounting, especially after a

patrolman had sworn he had seen some mysterious figures checking out their camp at midnight a few days back.

The camp wasn't much, just a collection of dark green tents of varying sizes with low walls encircling them, a series of open air mess tables, washing facilities and latrines. Parked in a row were several vehicles, mainly jeeps with a pair of, unbelievably, FV510 Warrior tracked armoured assault vehicles; God only knew how they had managed to get them here unobtrusively. The camp housed thirty men; a mixture of fighters, some logistics officers and the drivers for the Warriors. All ready to help the castle which was situated up the hill in the event of an emergency.

Right now though... right now, nothing was happening at all.

Then again, when things did happen to units of the British Army, you tended to find yourself wishing you were back in the more boring, safer times, really. Did wonders for your life expectancy.

“So you assaulted Professor Snape and probed his memory? I'm impressed, Harry,” Dumbledore said, sitting on a conjured armchair in Harry's clearing, the thestrals having gone to find some food. Harry was seated on the stump, which he had charmed to be more comfortable.

“Well, I didn't mean to assault him; I just kind of... lost it a bit. Anyway, my plan was to talk to the Prime Minister about this Magical Pacification force of his, and simply attack the Riddle Mansion with it. Any magical help would be appreciated, but I honestly don't know how smart it would be to leave Hogwarts and the Ministry undefended if anything goes wrong.”

“The Mansion is under Fidelus, Harry. How do you expect to break that, even before attempting to breach the other wards?” he stroked his beard in thought. “However... the Inferius magic, perhaps...”

“Not exactly,” Harry said with a small smile. “I think there are a number of things I can use to try to break it. The Fidelus is strong,

sure, but I've been thinking about how to break it. Voldemort is the secret keeper, but we know where the house is through prior experience. To us it'll appear to be either empty, or just not there. I'm guessing just empty, as the place is huge, not like Grimmauld Place, which is more easily concealable – people would notice if the Mansion just vanished. The thing is, the Mansion overlooks a graveyard, which is where Voldemort's father, Tom Riddle Sr., is buried."

"So you intend to dig up the skeleton and use it somehow?"

"I've done a bit of ward-breaking in my time, but never a Fidelus. I think using what is essentially the Secret Keeper's essence in the spell, it should help. He did it in the ritual he performed in my fourth year in the previous timeline."

"I see, that would probably work. If it would help, I will examine the use of using this... essence to amplify the ward-breaking spells. But frankly, Harry, I would not pin all your hopes on it."

"Well what will we do then?" Harry said, his voice taking on a hard edge. "Cower in Hogwarts and the Ministry while Voldemort plays his stupid cat and mouse game? According to you he's managed to get a bunch of magical creatures on his side already. This war, this war which seemingly no one gives a fuck about if they aren't the ones being hurt directly in it, is coming to a close. Light versus Dark, whatever the hell you want to call it, its going to just clash. And I'm going to have to be there, once again, but this time I think I'm ready, Dumbledore. Last time Hogwarts was burned to the ground with hundreds of innocent people inside, while all I could do was run."

"Harry, the International Confederation has-"

"They don't care. Britain is one of the oldest magical communities on this planet, and the bastards will just let us destroy ourselves. Half the fucking British wizards don't care either, even after Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. To them it's just something that happens to other people, something that won't affect them. And that mentality will

probably persist until the Death Eaters blow their doors down!" he gave Dumbledore a dark look, his eyes glowing faintly.

Dumbledore sighed, rubbing his forehead. "I agree that we need to go on the offensive. I will talk to Rufus, tell him I've contacted you. Him, Sirius, you and myself are the only men on this earth who know you are still working against Voldemort. Severus says he has three goals – the Ministry, Hogwarts, and to kill my good self."

"Well it looks like we'll have to point out that he hasn't won yet."

"Indeed, Harry." He paused for a second, considering his words. "And Harry... for what it is worth, despite all we've been through, I think James and Lily would still be proud of you." Dumbledore got up, vanishing the chair. "You may think you're alone, and that is mostly my fault, but don't forget that there are people up in that castle," he gestured in the rough direction of Hogwarts through the dark trees, "who still miss you daily. You may feel unable to connect with them, and I can understand that, but their feelings hold true nonetheless."

Harry's eyes dimmed, and he looked once more at the stars, cross-legged on his stump. Dumbledore remained silent for a moment, looking at the Boy Who Lived, before nodding and leaving Harry alone in the clearing.

Breaking a Fidelus would need preparation... as he walked through the shadowy forest, Dumbledore mentally resigned himself to yet another night without sleep.

Chapter 27 – Dealing With It

Hogwarts

Two days after Harry and Dumbledore had their clandestine meeting; Ron Weasley was sitting in Potions, keeping his head down, as he was wont to do these days. Snape had got even more vicious, the greasy git, now that the war was escalating. Ron didn't really know what his parents got up to in the war, but Bill had told him some of it – the older Weasley was a good correspondent for the Order inside Gringotts. All he knew was that it was getting worse. After Lucius' head had been delivered... well, he'd felt a measure of satisfaction, but it had brought it all home.

As he scribbled down potions theory in the dark dungeon classroom, powerful fumes making the air almost warped, he snuck a glance at Hermione, who was writing as though her life depended on it with her nose an inch from the page. They hadn't been that friendly since Harry had... gone, after Hogsmeade. They argued a lot, about stupid things, and Ron had found himself hanging around Seamus and Dean more and more, with Hermione just striking it out alone.

Harry had held them together, and now he was, well...

Ron shook his head, determined not to think about it again. He had had enough bad nights thinking about what had happened to Harry. He just missed his best friend.

Professor McGonagall stood alone in one of the third floor hallways, carefully checking to see if she was unobserved before pulling out her elegant wand. With a series of deft flicks and twists, she sent a wave of glittering sparks at a nondescript suit of armour, before whispering a set of instructions in Latin from a sheet of parchment clutched in her hand. The armour glowed a faint gold for several seconds, before settling back to its normal appearance. McGonagall smoothed down her emerald-green robes and smiled tightly. Hogwarts' defences were going to be suitably formidable, should He Who Must Not Be Named come calling.

She paused for a second, in reflection. Potter had brought them all headfirst into the war, before going out in a blaze of glory on the cobblestones of Diagon Alley. It had wrecked Albus, she could see, as the venerable Headmaster was simply not the same. Truth be told McGonagall missed the boy as well – even though he wasn't really the boy she had seen get the Philosopher's Stone or puzzle out the riddle of the Chamber, he was still a Gryffindor, after all. And he was just like James, with a bit of Black thrown in.

With a quiet, tired sigh, she shook her head and strode off down the carpeted corridor, looking for Peeves. Now for the next step in Dumbledore's instructions.

Remus sat on the edge of his dark red four-poster in Grimmauld Place, holding his head in his hands and shaking gently. He felt a warm hand touch his shoulder, and he shifted sideways to fall against Tonks, who, like him, was in her underwear. She stroked his hair and made soothing noises as he pressed his face into her shoulder, shuddering as he cried.

"It's OK, Remus," she said softly, still holding the werewolf gently.

Lupin's breathing slowed, before he spoke, his voice muffled by Tonks' body.

"I miss him, Tonks."

"Harry? I'm sorry, Remus, I know he was taken in Hogsmeade, but we just have to... let it go. For all we know he might still be alive, and we could get him back."

Remus squeezed her arm and nodded, but inside nothing changed. He knew Harry hadn't been 'taken'. He knew there was no hope of recovering the Boy Who Lived from where he had gone.

He knew he would never see Harry, the son of one of his best friends, ever again.

Wormtail lay on the simple bed in his darkened room, alone and comatose. A chink of sunlight filtered through the curtains and onto his face. He began to slowly drool, unable to move, speak, or react.

Just another casualty of war.

Charlie Weasley cursed colourfully as he dodged a tongue of flame, before jerking his wand around in an arc to deflect a second blast away with a flash of azure light. With a shouted command to the men standing beside him, he hissed an incantation and stabbed his wand forward, loosing a crackling bolt of red light at the writhing dragon looming over him. Similar bolts of light slammed into the dragon's head, and it opened its mouth in a silent shriek, before keeling over with a muffled thump.

They were in the Forbidden Forest, and the dragon was a vicious Hungarian Horntail; a nesting mother who had an impressive capacity for breathing fire, although currently the volume of sedative potion and spellwork flowing through her body reduced the potency of the flame dramatically. The dragon had been smuggled by Charlie with the help of the Order to become part of the Hogwarts defences; Hagrid's idea, of course, which Dumbledore had taken to.

The dragon was to be sedated in the Forest until there was a large incursion, whereby it would be released and placed under the Imperius curse by its five handlers – an Unforgivable cast fivefold would not totally subjugate the magically powerful beast, but would have a strong effect on its thought processes. Then it would be told to target things in Death Eater robes and let loose; a risky stratagem, but one that would be excellent for surprise. And if the situation warranted a barely controlled dragon to be used as a defence mechanism, it would probably be the least of their worries if anything went wrong.

Charlie wiped his brow, signalling his fellows to secure the dragon, which had unexpectedly broken its enchanted sleep when they tried to settle it down in the clearing. He was enjoying his Order work – it was exhilarating – but the danger to himself and his family was

significant. Bill had almost been caught out by the Goblins, who were becoming notoriously xenophobic after the Diagon Alley attack, and Gringotts was still essentially closed for business aside from secure Floo and owl.

What the Phoenix, whoever the man had been, had said had struck a chord with Charlie. The war wasn't just about the big players – You-Know-Who, Dumbledore, Scrimgeour, The late Phoenix – it was about them all, all of the Wizards, fighting for their freedom against the Death Eaters. Things were so small scale in the Wizarding World that such a group, barely numbering in the hundreds, could significantly threaten the way of life most held dear. And that was the problem, Charlie supposed – most people were willing to bury their heads in the sand, assuming their blood was pure enough when it came down to it, or whatever. When the new laws came in and the oppression began and they started to complain... well, it'd be too late.

What Charlie had decided he would do was help to stop there being a too late.

Sirius hadn't left his room since Dumbledore had told him about Harry.

He was preparing for the end of the war, the end of all this fucking madness.

Harry... what Dumbledore had done to him... what would James and Lily have said?

Kingsley looked at his opposite number from the Magical Pacification Force, and nodded amiably. They were overseeing joint Auror/Muggle training in a large, magically expanded, Ministry room. The Aurors were firing spells at dummies while the Muggles alternated between target practice and dodging spellfire. While the Muggle soldiers found it relatively easy, the men drawn from the police force were struggling relatively to dodge with precision. In return the Aurors were being shown some basic martial arts techniques by the Muggles, and being helped in weaponry

identification and operation – if an Auror could use or know to dodge a grenade it could give them the edge in a fight.

The Muggle commander, who was the man who had lead the operation in Diagon Alley, turned out to be a reasonable fellow, but one who didn't question his orders – “That's for the suits”, he had said. Kingsley found it hard to relate to someone who obeyed orders so... unflinchingly for a man in such a privileged position – Kingsley found ensuring that what you were doing was at least justified tended to make jobs easier, and was one of the reasons why he had questioned Fudge over his orders in the Hogsmeade massacre. Then again the Muggle military, which the commander had been drawn from, was far larger than anything the Wizards could hope to marshal, and the chain of command, Kingsley supposed, would have to be more rigid.

Regardless, he would like the man on his side in a fight. And the Pacification Force was, as they had proved, a force to be reckoned with.

Snape sat alone in his office as the night set in, examining a flask of yellow liquid critically, noting down its colour and clarity for a nondescript experiment. As he did so his mind was whirling, contemplating his situation, his future, and his prospects of survival. As a career spy, these things soon became second nature.

The Phoenix, and thus Potter, was dead. Dumbledore had been distraught, which was understandable, but the fight had also seemed to go out of him. Perhaps the fact the Dark Lord had taken him in single combat in Diagon Alley, and then the only person to trouble the Dark Lord had immediately been decapitated, had affected the old man more than Snape thought. Potter was skilled – dangerously so – and horrifyingly ruthless, to the point of outstripping a lot of the Death Eaters. The prophecy also said he was the only one able to defeat the Dark Lord, but frankly Snape knew prophecies weren't always true.

He was hoping for this particular one to have slight ambiguity to it. It was really all he could do – years of dangerous, damaging, spying

could not simply be thrown away because of the failure of a Potter. If things were going badly he'd simply incapacitate the Dark Lord with poison and hit him with a Killing Curse. Of course the chances of that actually succeeding were poor – the Dark Lord was hideously perceptive, his Legilimency honed to the point where intentions, if they were strong and emotionally charged enough, were easy for him to read. He would detect the treachery before Snape even stepped into the room.

Slytherins didn't throw away their lives that easily.

Snape rubbed his eyes, putting down the flask. The war was beginning to break him down; it was beginning to break everyone down, far more than the First one had. This one was quick, lightning fast, and filled with atrocities the First war simply hadn't had – Hogsmeade was rubble now. Snape's one wish, really his only wish, was that he make it through the damn thing alive, despite the blemish on his arm. He'd endured too much torture, too much subterfuge, been forced to do too many things, to just fail at the last gasp, like Potter had.

Lord Voldemort stood, Bellatrix at his side, examining the map she had enchanted for him. It showed, in fuzzy detail, the ruins of Hogsmeade and the Magical Pacification soldiers that were encamped there – Hogwarts' wards made the quality of the map poor, but it was serviceable.

"These muggle war machines," Voldemort pointed to a series of rough rectangles on the edge of the camp. "Describe their capabilities."

Bellatrix frowned. "My Lord, I don't know the full extent of what they can do. They seem to be piloted by Muggles, and have large Muggle guns fixed onto them, but I am confident magical shielding will turn aside any inferior weaponry they try to employ."

Voldemort ran a hand through his long black hair, thinking intently. "Bellatrix, I have finished the plans for our assaults. The Ministry and Hogwarts are going to be our targets. I will put Umbra at the head of

the Ministry contingent; they will consist largely of the numerous dark creatures I have at my command. However Krakus and Guter, the two giants that Macnair... procured before his demise, will accompany you, myself, and the majority of my Death Eaters to attack this Muggle encampment and head down the magical tunnel into Hogwarts. The primary goal will be to kill Albus Dumbledore and Rufus Scrimgeour."

"My Lord, it shall be done. Should I inform the ranks?"

"No, no. We still have a... spy in our midst. I was sure it was Severus, but my Legilimency probes assure me he is still loyal. I suspect Malfoy may have wavered, but your exposure of his despicable cowardice rules him out as the traitor. But it is of no matter. The forces will be given notice extremely close to the time, so as to minimise the risk of exposure."

Bellatrix nodded, and Voldemort waved her out of his wood-panelled study. Once she was gone he continued to examine the magical map in the dim light, marking on notations and arrows. The inferior Muggles would be eradicated, and Dumbledore would be slaughtered along with his disgusting herd of Mudblood students. Then he would take the Ministry and make the world realise why pure blood was the future.

He had removed Potter from the equation, despite the puzzling enigma of the boy's power – he would have to break Dumbledore and force the old man to spill his secrets. Voldemort felt a thrill of anticipation course through his body, and he smiled a dark smile.

It would be magnificent.

Moody stood in Grimmauld Place, looking out of his bedroom window at the sunrise over the terraced roofs of this particular part of London.

Potter... the lad had been formidable. Breaking into Azkaban at thirteen (well, more like his twenties, but it was still impressive)... not even Voldemort himself could attest to that. Moody scratched the

remains of his nose and yawned, his magical eye spinning and scanning, lingering slightly on the image of Hestia showering several floors up, before he focused back on the horizon.

Albus was evidently cracking. Moody could read Albus, he could see every death weigh down like a boulder tied to the Headmaster's neck. Hogsmeade had been hard on him, what with the kids being mown down in the crossfire, but Potter's death...

The worst thing in Albus' eyes had been that he hadn't stopped Voldemort himself during the Diagon Alley battle, and the even worse part was that Albus knew he possibly could have. Moody had had a review of the battle with a Pensieve and he'd seen, clearly, that Albus' technique was subdued and less forceful than he normally would have employed in such a life-or-death situation – no chucking the scenery around, no transfiguring a menagerie of hellish monsters. Moody had seen Albus' duel against Grindelwald in a Pensieve– it was the reason Moody was fucking scared of Albus Dumbledore. They'd levelled nearly half a square mile of Berlin suburb before Albus finally beat the old bastard down.

And the reason Albus didn't go all out? He was scared of hurting the Aurors and the innocents holed up in their shops. And now he was beating himself up about it, and Moody simply wanted to shake him and scream at him that that was the reason people trusted Dumbledore. He had saved lives by fighting like he had, and now he was beating himself up over the consequences. The man was in a vicious circle, but such was the nature of leadership.

Potter had bought it, but Albus was still there. Moody sighed as he was bathed in weak autumn morning light, and shook his head. Albus was still there, and Potter's demise was probably the heaviest weight of all around his neck now.

The Phoenix. Moody snorted. Unfortunately the kid couldn't live up to the name in the end. Would be good to see him rise from the fucking ashes right about now.

“We will not stand with them, Firenze,” Bane said calmly, but firmly. “The Humans have brought this pain upon themselves. The... abomination camping with the thestrals is barely tolerable as it is, but to lower ourselves to helping the Humans? Folly.”

“But Bane,” Firenze said quietly, shuffling uncomfortably on his hooves under the powerful centaur’s glare, “Harry Potter has... changed, we all know that. This effects more than just the Humans now. Their Dark Lord Voldemort... he invaded the Forest two years ago, he will do it again. We should lend our aid to them, even if it is just protecting the Forest.”

“Our Forest.” Bane said pedantically, scratching his flank. They stood in a dark part of the Forest, surrounded by trees. The morning sun trickled through the trees, dappling their hairy sides with specks of light.

“Indeed. But what are we going to do about this?”

Bane exhaled, crossing his arms. “Nothing, Firenze. They can do their petty infighting. We will endure.”

Firenze blinked and slowly shook his head, before turning away from Bane, who snorted with anger. “Bane, I fear this will not end well for us,” he said, before beginning to walk away into the undergrowth. “You know Mars is bright, war is coming. I think Harry Potter, abomination of nature or not, is the key to all of this. And I think that you are wrong.”

“So be it!” Bane shouted at Firenze’s retreating back. “You will fall with the rest of them, traitor! TRAITOR!”

Scrimgeour,

The Magical Pacification force has been formally signed over to your Auror division as of your receiving this letter; Davison, the organiser, volunteered to be submitted to one of your “Memory Charms” to ensure secrecy. Enclosed is a sheaf of paper detailing code which

can be used to organise support from the British Army and Navy, and the RAF. Simply call the phone number and follow the listed instructions.

This war of yours is reaching its zenith, I fear, and I have been forced to wave away the mysterious deaths of the people I am supposed to govern. The Phoenix has perished, and so have too many Britons, who were totally innocent. I ask you only this, Scrimgeour. Do not lose. If the unthinkable happens, I will be informed and then I think the world would have to change for the worst. So do your best.

Yours,

John Major

“Do my best? What does he think I’m doing?” Scrimgeour muttered. “I’ve got to deal with a fucking Dark madman, a rogue zombie with ridiculous amounts of power, a frightened population, super-Dementors and potential spies everywhere. I’m doing my best already!” he scribbled a note to Shackbolt, still whispering absently under his breath to himself, before tossing the note into the Floo and sending it on its way.

He was stressed as he had received a note from Dumbledore early that morning – a full day and night had passed since Harry and Dumbledore had met, but Scrimgeour wasn’t to know that. The note had requested the Magical Pacification Force and some Aurors be prepped to assault an unknown location in just a few days time, led by Potter himself, who had apparently recovered from being, well, dead and insane.

He hated to say it, but things were getting a little bit over his head. He was almost grateful when Dumbledore had simply said that he and Harry needed two things from Scrimgeour – the results of the Department of Mysteries’ workings on the Portkey Harry had taken from Azkaban, and a rigorous defence of the Ministry building to be concocted.

However, defending a place was hard when there were potential enemies in it. He had already uncovered two new defectors to Voldemort from the Auror ranks, and a sleeper cell from the Department of Transport who had had extensive memory charms done. Things were not black and white.

But really, when the end inevitably came...

Rufus knew, inside, that they would win. And that was more powerful than any spell.

Chapter 28 – The Beginning of the End

“So...”

“Plans are in motion, Harry. The Minister has got hold of the Unspeakables’ test results on the Portkey you retrieved, and they have uncovered some complex Arithmancy to do with Portkeying through the Fidelus on the Riddle Mansion; Tom’s work, I can only assume. I feel this will help us work out how to break the wards on Voldemort’s stronghold.”

Harry shifted in place where he was sitting in Dumbledore’s office – he had snuck in under his Invisibility Cloak, which Dumbledore had retrieved from Grimmauld Place, along with the Marauder’s Map. Harry was garbed in his pure white robes, while Dumbledore was in a typical eclectic green set. The portraits on the wall were all obscured with black cloth, a convenient privilege the Headmaster was able to command over his companions. The black marble Portkey sat on Dumbledore’s desk, along with various scraps of parchment with Arithmantic scribbling on them, and the Marauder’s map lay between them, crawling with tiny ink dots.

“I’m planning to take mainly Muggles. I’m not going to cleanse the place from the inside – I’m going to just blow the house up. Maximum confusion in the ranks.”

Dumbledore stroked his beard in thought. “Not a bad idea, as it happens. Tom is powerful, but you have proven to be able to stand up to him in the past; forgive me for saying that you haven’t won every time...” he looked at Harry’s corpse-white skin and bloodless lips with a regretful face, “but trying to take on him in his base of operations would be sheer folly. Destroying the house would be a needed show of force and a massive boost to morale, as well as fostering Muggle-Wizard relations through the combined operation. How do you intend to do this?”

Harry paused for a moment. “I’ll probably break the wards, have the Muggles hide in cover, and then just start throwing spells at the house, I suppose. I can’t imagine it will have that many defensive

shields in the brickwork – the Fidelus would probably be assumed to be enough. When the Death Eaters come out, I'll have the Muggles shoot them. If things get too hairy, we run. I don't intend this to be the "end of all things" or whatever, just a show of force."

"Better to not commit ourselves at present. We have no idea what Voldemort has in his arsenal, unfortunately. The only spy we have is Severus, and he gets Obliviated after every meeting, and I can only discern rudimentary things through Legilimency. We know Tom has Dark creatures, perhaps three hundred Death Eaters, and is aiming to kill both Rufus and I as soon as possible; of course he is unaware you are still... alive, for lack of a better word. Of course the only downside to this plan is that Voldemort will likely relocate should he survive, meaning we will have to find his base again."

"But in the meantime we could pull every Death Eater we have tabs on and interrogate them all before killing them. Thin his ranks as much as possible, put the wind up him. If we can make him do something stupid in desperation, then we could win this thing quicker than we thought. Or, at worst, cripple him so we can have more room to manoeuvre."

"Ah, me..." Dumbledore said with a heavy sigh. "I've had to make choices with people's lives for as long as I can remember, Harry. Grindelwald was just the beginning. I lost so many people... we didn't have an Order back then, I was attached as a young wizard to one of the British Governments magical intelligence corps – strictly for the war, and as secret as the Pacification Force is now. I remember some of the attacks... passed off as incendiary bombing, but it was often far worse. Inferi prowled the streets of some of the most devastated cities at night – London saw a few, Stalingrad was... horrible, Dresden was infested towards the end of the war, part of the reason for the firebombing... the War itself helped to cover the Wizarding World's tracks, but of course Grindelwald and his Europe-wide organisation just revelled in the destruction. Dark times, Harry..."

Harry sighed. "And we'll see them again if we don't stop Riddle this time around."

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "We'll see worse."

Little Hangleton Graveyard

The graveyard was deserted; truly a place of rest at that point late at night. The moon was shining, nearly full, and dim silver light barely illuminated the gravestones and their inscriptions. A black-cloaked figure strode through the large wrought iron gates, a large hood obscuring his face as he stalked between the headstones of the dead. Before long he found himself in the centre of the reasonably large plot of land where the deceased of Little and Greater Hangleton ended up, and he stood still for a moment.

Then the strange man reached into his pocket and withdrew a white stick of yew, before walking towards a random headstone and pausing, as though gathering himself.

Then Lord Voldemort spoke. He spat a whispered incantation, before crouching and tapping his wand onto the earthy ground of the graveyard, and hissed some more complex Latin spells. Finally, he pulled some silver powder from an inner pocket in his robes and tossed it onto the ground, where it flared brightly and then vanished. For a moment nothing happened.

Then the skies darkened, and cloud swirled as if from nowhere to blot out the moon, leaving the graveyard swathed in true midnight darkness. Voldemort smiled from beneath his hood, and tapped the ground again with his wand, whispering a final series of words.

After a few seconds a sound of scraping and scrabbling could be heard, before finally the earth itself began to churn and small pits of sinking dirt and mud formed over the majority of graves in the cemetery. Voldemort watched as, slowly, hands and arms began to force their way through the gravelly dirt and onto the surface, and bit by bit corpses began to dig themselves out of their graves.

Young and old, male and female, in varying stages of decomposition from surprisingly fresh bodies to desiccated skeletons propelled by magic; the Inferi numbered in the dozens, and all had a chilling red

glow in their eyes, or sockets if their eyes had rotted. Once they had dug themselves out, the Inferi stood to attention by their graves, as Voldemort looked on. Notably a few graves remained untapped; that of Tom Riddle Senior, and two other Riddles. Voldemort knew that familial bone magic could be potentially useful.

He observed his Inferi army, admiring his handiwork in the fluidity of their motions; these were not the clumsy crude creations he had made to guard his Horcrux back when he was a youth, no, these were impressive creations wrought of Darkest magic and enhanced by virtue of his own power.

He hissed a command and the Inferi obeyed, kicking and scooping the earth they had disturbed back into their graves, before Voldemort finished up with a spell which swiftly replaced the grass that had been uprooted, leaving the graveyard as it had been before; simply now devoid of occupants. The Inferi, at another command from Voldemort, then turned to march swiftly up the hill to the Riddle Mansion, which overshadowed the cemetery like a brooding giant. From where Voldemort stood the house looked abandoned, but he knew once he walked through its ward boundaries the place would come to life with lights in the windows and Death Eaters patrolling the grounds. He intended to move the Inferi to the warded eaves where the Dementors had roosted before the blasted Phoenix – Potter - had destroyed most of them.

The Ministry wouldn't know what had hit it when sixty Inferi ended up in the Atrium. He was making his move soon, and soon the Wizarding World would be his, and then...

Well. Why stop at Britain?

The International Confederation of Wizards, Atlantic Ocean

The small island where the ICW was to be found was situated in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean, contained in a magical barrier which ensured calm waters. Roughly the size of Vatican City, the ICW was a collection of grand gothic buildings; a library, an assembly hall and a reception building being the most prominent.

At present the ICW had been called to an emergency meeting by Albus Dumbledore, the Supreme Mugwump; the third such meeting in a few weeks, an amount that was practically unheard of. The thirty main representatives of the major magical nations, prominently European, with the USA, China, India and Russia as the big players elsewhere, were all seated in the assembly hall awaiting Dumbledore. Most of them were impatient; no doubt it would be concerning the damnable Voldemort again – why Britain couldn't deal with its own problems, no one knew.

The assembly hall was a large modern space with a horse-shoe shaped set of seats, enough for fifty people, all facing a central podium where the person addressing the ICW stood. The various venerable wizards present filled the majority of the seating. Dumbledore himself stood, resplendent in his purple and gold Mugwump regalia, at the podium.

“Good afternoon,” he said, enhanced by a Sonorous charm, once everyone was seated. “Representatives of the major magical nations, I have called you together as the Supreme Mugwump to ask you, one last time, for your aid.”

There was an eruption of jeers and babble, as various delegates made known their displeasure at apparently having their time wasted once more.

“Please, let me finish,” Dumbledore said calmly. “The Dark Lord Voldemort,” several people flinched, “is growing in power and influence day by day. You must have heard of the massacres in our Diagon Alley shopping district, and the village of Hogsmeade, where several of my students were killed. The one man who seemed to be able to stand against him in single combat, the vigilante commonly known as the Phoenix, has been killed by Voldemort's hand. I come before you as the Supreme Mugwump, but also as a Headmaster worried for his students, and a man fearing for the wellbeing of his friends. Britain is holding out, but the influence of such a man as Voldemort is potent indeed, and international help would be greatly appreciated.”

There was silence for a moment following his statement, before a dark skinned wizard in brown robes stood up from his seat; the delegate from India. "Supreme Mugwump," he began in a surprisingly high-pitched voice, "I have heard disturbing rumours from Britain. Is it true you have liaised strongly with the Muggles? You have accepted a Muggle military force into your Ministry?"

Dumbledore nodded, and there was a sharp intake of breath from the assembled wizards, and several shook their heads. Dumbledore frowned at this. "And what, if I may pose the question to Delegate Chopra, is wrong with this?"

The Indian representative paused for a moment, before seemingly choosing his words carefully. "Mugwump... they're Muggles. I-"

Dumbledore's frown deepened, and the air grew cold in the meeting chamber. "And that is part of your justification for condemning Great Britain, oldest of the magical states, to potential ruin? Your dislike of non-magical folk?"

There was a general murmur of assent and anti-Muggle sentiment, even from the more liberal of the delegates, such as the United States and France. Dumbledore knew the overwhelming majority of those assembled were considered pureblood, and there were certainly no Muggleborns in the ICW. He shook his head sadly, gripping the pulpit with both hands. "Just remember this, those who have refused my pleas for aid thrice," Dumbledore began darkly, "whatever happens to Britain, who apparently must stand alone in this, the consequences will affect you all. Racism at the heart of our community... you're all worse than the Muggles you look down upon. At the very least they acknowledge their prejudices and don't hide them behind supposed tradition."

There were several sharp intakes of breath at that. With one last look, Dumbledore tapped his wand on the pulpit and there was a flash of scarlet light as Dumbledore disappeared, indicating the end of the sitting of the ICW.

“My... Lord?” the enhanced Dementor known as Umbra hissed, hovering in front of Voldemort’s seat in the Dark Lord’s opulent private quarters in the upper floors of the magically-expanded Riddle Mansion.

“We attack in two days,” Voldemort said calmly. “You are to lead the assault on the Ministry, via the main Atrium. I will organise the Floo to be fixed to this mansion. You will command several Death Eaters, and the majority of the Dark Creatures under my control, including the Inferi. Do not fail me.” The last statement was said with such finality that even the Dementor felt stirrings of apprehension. The Dark Lord was staring at the creature with his intense, unblinking eyes, until finally the Dementor hissed its assent, and Voldemort turned back to his work.

“Remember, Scrimgeour is your primary target, and the Auror leaders second. Spill their blood. There is no vigilante to get in your way this time.”

One Day Later

Scrimgeour looked Dumbledore in the eye, sitting at his desk in his office, with Dumbledore’s head nestled in the fireplace. “So... you think we have an attack coming, potentially tomorrow. An attack on the Ministry.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore said calmly. “Severus was able to overhear a conversation between Voldemort and his... creation, Umbra. Although he was routinely Obliviated on leaving Voldemort’s stronghold, I managed to glean the gist of it using Legilimency – unfortunately Severus was knocked unconscious during this and experience a good deal of pain, and is unable to present evidence personally; he is still recovering.”

Scrimgeour rubbed his eyes. “This is it, then.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I would say it is, Rufus. I would say it is.”

“And what of Potter?”

“He is going to lead an assault on Voldemort’s headquarters, using the Magical Pacification soldiers as best he can. Either we can pre-empt any attack, or we can do maximum damage while Voldemort is absent.”

“A risky move, Dumbledore. Potter is one of the few that can actually duel V-Voldemort,” he swallowed, now finally using the name everyone feared, “we might need him. And now you’ve put me in a fucking difficult situation. I can’t evacuate the Ministry, as Voldemort will a) realise you have a spy and potentially kill Snape, and b) probably just attack somewhere else, maybe even a Muggle area. So I’m having to balance on a knife-edge, and try to keep as many of our forces as possible in the Ministry building so if Voldemort attacks, we’re able to meet his assault. This is too much, Dumbledore. I have to sacrifice innocents.”

“As have I, in the past. It’s just something we have to do, as the leaders of these people. The ICW is not going to help us, they’re racist and rotten to the core, I have unpleasantly discovered. Should we make it out of this in one piece, I intend to... put pressure on the international community to be more liberal in their views.”

“Scare them shitless through the fact you could take them all on and win, you mean,” Scrimgeour said with a snort. Dumbledore raised an eyebrow, and gave a small smile, but said nothing.

“Right,” Scrimgeour said, getting out of his seat. “I will get the Unspeakables to set up some nasty surprises in the Atrium, probably under the pretence of ward maintenance, and inform Shacklebolt of a... need for vigilance, as Mad-Eye would say. What of your Order?”

“They will remain in Grimmauld Place and assist if necessary. I have a growing feeling that Hogwarts herself may also be a target should Voldemort attack, but I have no idea about how he thinks he could breach the castle.”

“He did it to Potter before the boy time-travelled.” Scrimgeour pointed out, running a hand through his lion-like hair.

“Yes, with the help of a potent dark artefact that I know for a fact he hasn’t been able to retrieve, or may not even know about – I have kept in contact with the Ministry of the country where the artefact is currently hidden, and they have reported nothing out of the ordinary. No... I feel if he attacks Hogwarts, it will be through hitherto unforeseen methods.”

“Something escaping the great Albus Dumbledore?” Scrimgeour said with a raised eyebrow. Dumbledore shook his disembodied head with a small smile.

“There is, lamentably, a first time for everything.”

Harry stood on top of a medium-sized hill overlooking a sleepy village, the sun beginning to set in the sky. He sighed as he observed the twinkling lights begin to turn on in the collection of buildings below, in anticipation of the darkening sky. With keen eyes Harry picked out a graveyard, an abandoned mansion and a small scrub of woodland behind said mansion, which was on top of a raised patch of land overshadowing the village. Little Hangleton had no idea what was about to happen to it.

Harry paused for a moment and then sat down, garbed in his pure white robes and with his obsidian-black mask securely fixed in place. He looked at his white-gloved hand and pulled off the leather glove and held his hand up to the dying light. It was so pale it was nearly translucent, and the skin was papery and dry, sustained and held together through Dumbledore’s potent magical ritual. He had been feeling a bit more... human since he had visited Hogwarts and lived around the castle for a few days – Dumbledore had informed him the ambient magic of the castle and ground had invigorated his magically-charged body, and it helped that the Headmaster of the school had been the one to resurrect him. Harry had felt his heart pump sporadically – a strange feeling to be aware of – and had been able to breathe, albeit very asthmatically, for short periods of time.

His body was showing signs of life, but was hardly going to restore itself through virtue of being near Hogwarts.

Still, it was nice to feel alive again, even if it was just to feel his heart struggle to pump congealed blood around his clogged vessels.

He cast a spell with his left hand, noting the time from the misty blue timepiece which appeared in the air before him, and counted under his breath for several seconds.

“Three... Two... One...”

There was a rush of wind, and thirteen figures materialised beside him, the majority of them falling unsteadily to the ground as the Portkey dumped them unceremoniously onto the hillside. Harry got to his feet and observed the twelve Magical Pacification soldiers and one wizard gather themselves and turn to face him, most of them looking a little unnerved. Harry, however, hissed in shock when he saw the wizard.

Sirius.

“Harry?” Sirius said weakly, seeing an imposing black-masked figure standing on the hillside.

“Sirius...” Harry said, and took two steps forward before embracing the black shaggy-haired wizard. “I’m alright, Sirius. I just want to end this,” he said tightly, before they separated and Harry looked at the assembled Muggle soldiers.

They were all tall men of varying ethnicities, but all garbed in the same black outfits and carrying the same equipment; some Ministry protective talismans, grenades, a backpack filled with Merlin knew what, and several firearms. Harry nodded at them, his featureless mask hiding his face, and the soldiers nodded back, some nervously.

“We will strike soon,” Harry said crisply. “The target is that mansion,” he gestured at the Riddle Mansion below in the valley. “It is heavily warded, and filled with hostiles. The objective is not to

capture, but merely to sow confusion, break morale and cause as much damage as possible. Some of the soldiers seemed to perk up at the prospect of this.”

“Sir,” one of them said, an imposing black man who looked like he could bench press Hagrid, “The house looks uninhabited.”

“Part of the wards. I will bring them down.”

Sirius, standing next to Harry in black robes, looked at him oddly. “Break a Fidelus?”

“Dumbledore and I have been working on it.” That was enough for Sirius, who nodded.

“It is nearly nightfall,” Harry said, as the sky began to darken. “Twenty minutes after sunset, we will make our move. First to the graveyard,” he pointed it out, “and then onto the mansion. Sirius and I will break the wards and begin to bring the place down, your jobs are to protect us and kill any aggressive Death Eaters. There may be Dark Creatures present; shoot to kill, but warn me should you see anything out of the ordinary.”

“Dark Creatures?” the black soldier, seemingly the de facto leader of the group, said quizzically. “Werewolves, Vampires?”

“You should have been briefed on these,” Harry said, “but I would forgive you for being sceptical. Yes, they exist, yes they might be there. As I said, shoot to kill.”

With that, the Muggles began to check and double check their equipment waiting for the sun to set, while Harry sat on the grass to talk to Sirius.

“So Harry... Dumbledore told me what he had done...” Sirius began awkwardly.

“Just try not to think about it, Sirius,” Harry said wearily. “I’ve gotten used to it already. I’m a walking corpse, nature itself hates me, all

magical creatures instinctively flee me bar the Thestrals... and I don't breathe, I don't eat, my heart doesn't beat... my body is rotting, yet I'm still here. Harry Potter, eh?"

"Boy Who Lived," Sirius said with a small smile. There was another awkward silence. "James and Lily... they would be pretty damn proud of you, Harry."

"What, proud that I've fought this war once and lost, and then got myself killed on my second chance?" he said with a hint of bitterness, staring out at the sky, which was now glowing with muted reds and yellows of a sunset.

"No, no... proud that you endured it all, and are still fighting for what's right. You've done more than us, and more than any of us ever will, to bring down V-V... Voldemort, and that's what matters."

Harry looked at Sirius and smiled behind his mask, before looking at the sunset. "Its beautiful, isn't it?" he said wistfully. Sirius nodded, and they sat there for a moment watching the sun slowly sink behind the horizon, infusing the sky with bright autumnal colours.

"Gryffindor colours," Harry said with a short laugh. "Good omen?"

"We can only hope," Sirius said. "We can only hope."

"Well, its time. Lets head out."

Voldemort stood in the main magically expanded entrance hall of the Riddle Mansion, surrounded by his troops and subordinates. The full magical might of the Heir of Slytherin was arrayed in that one room, suited and booted and prepared for battle. Werewolves, Veela (to the delight of the vat majority), Vampires, Death Eaters, Inferi (to the disgust of all those present), a couple of trolls and the remaining handful of Dementors (reining in their abilities) were all facing the Dark Lord, who stood with his back to the front door.

“My followers,” he began, “tonight is the night. You have all dreamt of a cleaner world, a world without the filth of blood pollution. A world where the right beings have power, and the weak are swept away and cleansed. Tonight is the night where this world is created. You all have your transportation devices, you all have your destinations and objectives. A dozen of my loyal Death Eaters and several of Fenrir’s wolves,” he nodded at the savage Greyback, who was surrounded by his hairy brethren, “will remain behind to guard the mansion. They will be... rewarded for their loyalty in this. For the rest of you... do not fail me.”

With that final word, the Portkeys activated and nearly all the Death Eaters along with a handful of dark creatures, including Voldemort, vanished. There was one long beat, and the rest of the congregation, mainly dark creatures, vanished in a plume of green Floo fire, leaving the entrance hall of the Riddle Mansion empty bar the guards, who sauntered off to man their posts.

The Dark Lord’s attack had begun.

The Ministry

The operations room was quiet that evening, and there was only one wizard on duty manning the scrying screens. The wizard in question was sipping some coffee and scanning the Minister’s Defence Column in that morning’s Prophet, when the scrying screens suddenly lit up, and caught his eye.

The man’s blood ran cold, and he began to feel sick as he processed what he saw. On the Hogwarts screen, nothing had changed. The Hogsmeade screen, however, now showed a black mass of “Unknown” which had just Portkeyed in and was surrounding the Muggle forces camped there, including two unfeasibly large dots which could easily be giants. But worst of all was the Ministry building scrying screen. The Atrium was now full of dots, and the worst thing was that they were all clearly labelled.

Dementor? – Unknown

Dementors – Azkaban Renegades – WARNING. WILD DEMENTORS.

Werewolves – Germanic Origin

Veela – Eastern European Origin

Death Eaters – Unknown – WARNING. KNOWN FUGITIVES.

Inferi – WARNING. NECROMANTIC MAGIC.

“Oh...” the ministry worker said, as he scrambled to hit the alarm buttons mounted on the wall next to the screens. He watched in horror as the dots labelled as Ministry workers manning the front desks, and using the main lift, winked out of existence as the people they represented were killed.

“Oh fuck.”

Chapter 29 – Inheriting the Earth

“Well, its time. Let’s head out.”

Harry and Sirius beckoned to the soldiers, and as one they stole down the hill, Harry and Sirius casting disillusionment spells on them all on the way. They quickly reached the graveyard, and vaulted the low stone wall surrounding it; Harry told them to spread out and look for “Riddles”. The sky darkened as they searched, and a faint mist began to set in, before one soldier called that he had found the grave of Riddle Senior. Harry jogged over, Sirius at his side, and adjusted his mask as he peered at the gravestone through the thickening fog.

He remembered that cracked gravestone. He had been tied to it, in the previous timeline... he rubbed his arm, where Wormtail had pierced him with a knife. Over there... he looked at a patch of earth not far from where the group was now huddled – over there Cedric had died, and where he was standing Voldemort had been reborn from that blasted cauldron. Lost in memories for a second, it took a prompting from Sirius for Harry to snap back into action.

“Sorry, I was just thinking. You,” he pointed at a hatchet-faced soldier, “check out the other graves. Look for anything unusual.”

With that he pulled out his wand and pointed it at the earth in front of Riddle’s gravestone, and whispered an incantation. There was a pause, and then a shard of bone, perhaps a femur, shot through the earth and hovered in mid air, where Harry grabbed it. The soldiers blinked but said nothing, knowing better than to ask.

“Sir,” the soldier Harry had sent to recon the graveyard said, “look at the other graves. The grass on them is brand new, compared to the rest of the graveyard. Looks unusual.”

Harry nodded at him and examined the other graves. He was right, the grass was completely fresh, and a different length. Harry’s blood ran cold, and he cast a couple of spells to make sure.

The graves were empty. All of them, bar some Riddle graves. Voldemort had evidently made some Inperi.

“Warn the Ministry, Voldemort has made Inperi out of the bodies that were here,” he said to Sirius, who nodded and pulled out a communicator disc from his robes – similar to the slates Harry and Dumbledore had, but with picture. He cast an orange spell at the disc, and raised his eyebrows when it didn’t work.

“Apparently, no one’s home. That can’t be good, Harry.”

“Could be the interference from the mansion’s Fidelius. We’ll break that and try again,” Harry said, before gesturing to the disillusioned group to move onwards, towards the small hill where the Mansion was built. As they approached the bottom of the hill, Harry raised a barely-visible arm for them to stop, and cast a small unobtrusive blue spell straight ahead. The spell streaked forward silently for a few feet, before vanishing abruptly. Harry nodded to himself.

“We’re at the edge of the Fidelius.” He said to the group. Sirius, come here with me. I’m going to try to knock it down.

“What do you need me to do? And will it hurt?”

“This is going to take a lot of power, and might hurt us a lot. But I think with this,” he waved the bone he had taken, “and this,” he pulled out the marble Portkey from his pocket, “we should be able to do it.”

Sirius nodded gingerly, and Harry focused on what he and Dumbledore had worked out. He flicked his wand at the bone, pulverising it instantly into a fine powder, and conjured up a bowl to put the bone-fragments into, along with the small marble Portkey. He whipped his wand back and forth over the clay bowl, mumbling some spells and causing the mixture inside to glow a sickly green, lighting up Harry’s disillusioned and masked face. He then levitated the bowl into the air, and hissed a spell to Sirius, telling him to cast it on three.

“One... Two... Three!” he shouted, banishing the bowl at the invisible ward ahead. When the bowl hit the ward, the bone fragments

and Portkey spilled out and hit the Fidelius with a blinding green flash, as Harry and Sirius shouted the words to a ward-breaking curse. There was a rumbling boom and a shockwave crashed into the group, and Sirius and the soldiers were knocked off of their feet, with only Harry hanging on, channelling pale blue energy from his wand into the invisible Fidelius ward. He yelled, and his body exploded into magical flames as he began to put everything he had into the spell. The blue line of magic thickened into a shimmering rope of power, vanishing when it touched the wards.

After three long seconds, there was a sound like breaking glass, and the Riddle Mansion suddenly lit up as it was revealed, with lights coming on in the windows. Harry grunted with the exertion, and the flames around his body died down and vanished. They were left at the foot of the hill leading up to the Riddle Mansion, square in the middle of the main gravel path to the front door. Harry smiled behind his mask. The spell had been weakened severely by the blood magic and the arithmancy involved with the Portkey – it helped that Harry was above average in power, and the Riddle mansion was surrounded on all sides by Muggle technology. Those things tended to weaken wards over time; Riddle must have thought he wouldn't need the Fidelius to last that long. But Harry knew the wards would not be down for long : even he couldn't break a Fidelius permanently. They had twenty minutes, tops.

“Come on,” he snapped at the soldiers and Sirius, who were getting up, Sirius swearing to himself as he brushed dirt from his robes. “The Death Eaters would have heard that. Let's go.”

The Riddle Mansion

“Did you hear that?” one of the Death Eaters left on guard said, sitting up from where he had been playing cards with the other dozen men.

“What, Alastar?” a werewolf asked, scratching his chin.

“That noise, like a cannon,” the Death Eater, Alastor, said, getting up from where they were sitting in the kitchen, and walking over to look out of the window. As he peered through the grimy glass, there was a sound like breaking glass, and the lights in the house dimmed and fizzed.

“... The fuck?” another werewolf said in gravelly tones, knocking back his Firewhiskey. “Let's go to the entrance hall and check it out. Don't want to incur the Dark Lord's wrath.”

The rest nodded and slowly got to their feet, downing drinks and grabbing cloaks and masks. They had wanted to be part of the Master's attack on the bloody Muggle-lovers, but guard duty wasn't so bad when there was an extensive alcohol cellar in the Riddle Mansion, which was unwarded. They trudged into the entrance hall of the mansion, and began to assemble. The man who had first noticed a disturbance, a tall thin fellow with greasy hair and a ratty face behind his sleek mask, moved to open the door. As he reached for the handle, there was a noise akin to a shrieking firecracker, and then-

Boom.

The oak front door of the Riddle Mansion exploded with a deafening roar, sending the unfortunate Death Eater flying backwards in a shower of fire and splinters. The man careened into his fellows, knocking them all flat and eliciting yells of pain and shock. As they struggled to recover from the unexpected attack, there was a metallic clink as several mysterious metal canisters flew through the burning ruined door frame. After two long seconds of silence, the grenades detonated in a storm of shrapnel and explosive fury, riddling the Death Eaters with hot metal and sending their bodies flying across the hall, arms and legs akimbo.

One of the guards, a werewolf, found himself shielded from the blast by his fellows, and struggled to his feet when the dust began to settle, scrabbling frantically at his head and groaning in pain as blood leaked from his nose and ears. He wavered for a second where he stood,

before drunkenly staggering and collapsing amongst the bodies of his fellows in a cloud of dust and dirt.

Seconds later, there was a muffled shout from outside the mansion and a thunderbolt of flame streaked through the broken splintered door and, lighting up the swirling dust in the air, hit a finely-wallpapered wall. The Fiendfyre screeched and howled on impact, feeding off of the magic in the air, and began to devour the wall with cursed flame, swiftly raising the temperatures to unbearable degrees and cooking the flesh of the Death Eaters.

Outside, Harry Potter watched the fire calmly. He now knew the Mansion was essentially deserted, which could only mean one thing. Riddle had launched his assault. He ignored the silent figures of Sirius and the soldiers standing behind him, and hurled another Fiendfyre curse at the mansion, blowing out a top floor window and starting a second fire. With one last look at the house he turned away and nodded to two of the Muggles, who hefted their backpacks off of their disillusioned shoulders and rummaged around for a pair of explosive charges, which they expertly primed and Harry banished through random windows. After a sort wait, the windows exploded in a tongue of fire and broken, melted glass, and a pair of orange glows shone from the wounded front facade of the Riddle Mansion.

“We’re done here,” Harry said bitterly. “He’s not here. He’s attacked, that’s why we got no response from the Ministry when you tried, Sirius. I’ll go to Hogwarts, with half of the Muggles. Sirius... you go to the Ministry.”

Sirius cancelled the disillusionment charms on the group, and gave Harry a hard look.

“Harry,” he began, “I... just... be careful.”

Harry looked at him and removed his mask, revealing his corpse-white face. He smiled a crooked smile. “I don’t think it’d matter either way, Sirius. As Dumbledore would say, this is the point where we have to do what’s “right”. But thanks. You too.”

With that, the two embraced each other for a brief moment, before nodding at their respective groups and priming the Portkeys.

“Sirius,” Harry said before they left, putting his black mask back on. “Good bye, and good luck. I’ll see you when this is all over.”

“Count on it.”

Several Minutes Earlier

Eric Munch was having a slow night. As the main Ministry watchwizard for the Atrium, he didn’t have much to do when the sun went down and visitors dried up – his shift ended in an hour, thankfully. He had his feet up, and was reading the Prophet, when he heard the ding of the Ministry lift. Glancing behind him, he saw a couple of wizards standing in the lift; an Auror, a DMLE worker, and what looked like a secretary. As they were exiting the lift, Eric felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, and a chill run through his body. He glanced back at the Ministry main atrium, with the Fountain of Magical Brethren and the numerous Floo fireplaces, seeing nothing out of the ordinary.

There was a pregnant pause, and Eric began to hear a dull humming in his ears. The wizards who had left the lift were also standing still and looking curiously into the atrium, as though they could sense something was about to happen.

As one, the fireplaces in the Floo grates ignited, illuminating the atrium with an eerie green glow, which sparkled off of the water from the Fountain.

One second passed, and the dull humming grew louder. Eric fumbled for the panic button on the underside of his desk, thinking that this definitely wasn’t normal.

One more second passed, and the humming grew into a dull roar, and all of a sudden thick roiling flames spilled out of the fireplaces, engulfing the Atrium in a sea of obscuring green flame, but with no

accompanying heat. Eric fell out of his seat, yelling in shock, as the Fountain of Brethren was entirely swallowed by the wall of green fire. A terrible keening shriek echoed throughout the cavernous Atrium, and the green mass of fire intensified for one brief moment, before being swallowed back into the fireplaces as though nothing had happened.

In their place was a sea of bodies. Beautiful women with silvery-blond hair stood menacingly around the Fountain, flanked by hooded faceless floating figures in tattered robes. Scattered about the crowd were men in black robes and white masks, along with feral, rabid looking men wearing rags. The vast majority, however, were pale-faced corpse-like monstrosities, naked or garbed in rotted clothing. Some were just skeletons, grinning emptily and they all crouched, cat-like, on the floor of the Atrium. Atop the Fountain, a Dementor floated, a pair of arms ending in black blades hanging limply at its sides.

A long, long second passed, as Eric could only stare. Then a rush of piercing cold hit him, and an Inferius, a thin man in a ruined suit who was missing half its face, screamed and leapt an impossible distance across the Atrium. It landed on Eric's desk, still screaming, and seized his terrified head in both hands, before twisting violently and sending the head watchwizard flying backwards with a broken neck. The Death Eaters in the horde of Dark Creatures then acted swiftly, nailing the three shocked wizards who had come in the lift with Killing Curses.

"Secure the Atrium..." Umbra said, floating silently at the head of the group of Dark Creatures. "Seal the grates... we will go in through the Lift..."

Grimmald Place

Mad-Eye Moody was seated in the kitchen of the Order Headquarters, browsing an interesting Dark Arts grimoire Albus had found for him and scanning the house with his other, magical, eye, when his pocket began to buzz and heat up. Immediately he got to his feet, the book

disregarded, and pulled out a small red marble from his pocket, which was vibrating rapidly and giving off waves of warmth.

The Ministry alarms, which the marble had been tied to by Albus, had been activated.

Moody limped swiftly to the door of the kitchen, and brandished his wand, setting off a cannon-like sound, and then silenced the bloody portrait of Black's mother. After several seconds the members of the Order who were staying in the house; Lupin, Tonks, Hestia Jones, Mundungus and some assorted others including the Weasley parents, had assembled in the hallway. Moody examined them all for a moment without speaking.

"Its time," he said gruffly. "He's attacking the Ministry. We're to go and help defend it. Transfigure your robes red so as to blend in with the Aurors, and let's go."

He gave the Order a moment to digest that information, fear appearing on some people's faces, determination on others. After a few seconds of disorganised wand-waving, their robes were all properly transfigured, and Moody tossed them a conjured black rope.

"Portkey," he said shortly. "It'll take us to the DMLE. Good luck everyone. Portus."

"Whats going on?" Kingsley shouted as he entered the Operations room, two minutes after the alarms had sounded. The room was already a whirl of activity, with people activating wards and sending warnings to the outside world. The DMLE, where Kingsley had just come from, was in an uproar as Aurors and DMLE wizards prepared for combat, without knowing what they were fighting. He had seen the Order, a sizable chunk of it, Portkey in just before the wards snapped into place. Reassuring to know that Dumbledore had his back.

"Sir, we have a massive incursion into the Atrium. Everyone in there is dead, and the enemy is currently locking down the Floo system and tampering with the spells on the lift."

Kingsley looked at the scrying screen. Veela, Dementors, Inferi... bugger.

“Get the Unspeakables to the lift. Get them to reroute every destination to the DMLE. We’ll funnel them into there and take them on in there.”

“I’ll get Croaker and his team onto it, sir.” The ministry worker said, grateful to have someone who knew what they were doing. “The Minister has been informed, but apparently there is something happening at Hogwarts as well.”

Kingsley’s blood ran cold; this was You-Know-Who’s final gambit, if he was going for the Ministry and Hogwarts at the same time.

“Keep me updated if anything changes,” he said, patting the Operations worker on the shoulder. “Good luck.”

The DMLE was on the second-highest floor of the Ministry, just underneath the Minister’s offices, whereas the Atrium was several levels below. Kingsley utilised his intra-building Portkey, something carried by all Aurors and Unspeakables, to get back up to the DMLE floor quickly, and found a scene much more ordered than when he had left. Moody was working with Dawlish and Scrimgeour to address the Aurors, Order and Hit-Wizards of the regular DMLE, along with several dozen normal Ministry workers who had evidently decided to have a go of it. Moody turned around when Kingsley Portkeyed in, and nodded at him.

“We’ve sent all non-combatants into the Department of Mysteries,” he said to Kingsley. “Half of the Unspeakables, so about a dozen, are working on the Lift, and the other dozen are protecting the innocents. If it all goes to hell they’ll blast through the wards and Portkey out, but we need to keep the wards as intact as possible for now. We’ve got most of the Aurors in; apparently Rufus had a tip off. The rest of them are in Hogwarts...”

“We’re funnelling the bastards onto this floor. Its mainly Dark creatures – Veela, Dementors, Inferi, Werewolves. I spotted some Death Eaters on the scrying screen, however.” Kingsley replied.

Moody’s face darkened. “Right,” he said, turning back to the motley group of wizards. “We need to transfigure some defences in here – rock shields, set some traps if you can. The enemy will be coming up through the lift. Voldemort may be with them, he may not be. We just don’t know.”

Scrimgeour took over. “There is another incursion at Hogwarts. Frankly, we don’t know what’s happening there. The last thing I heard from the Prime Minister was reports of a pair of giants attacking the Hogsmeade encampment. For now, we need to hold the Ministry, and beat them back. Maybe then we can relieve the people defending Hogwarts. We need to fortify this place; the Aurors will show you what to do.”

He signalled to the Auror squad leaders, who turned and began to order around the various wizards. The DMLE was mainly cubicles, with the Auror department and the Hit Wizard department merged together into one large open space. The wizards began to swiftly Vanish the cubicle walls, and in seconds the room was entirely open plan, but littered with desks, wastepaper baskets and other general office detritus.

“Turn the desks into stone walls,” Moody barked. “Line ‘em up, make defensive lines. Not too many, we need room to manoeuvre. You,” he pointed at a gaggle of DMLE Hit Wizards, garbed in their navy blue uniforms in contrast to the scarlet red of the Aurors, “lay some fire hexes around the place. They have Inferi, that’ll deter them.”

The room was a maelstrom of activity for several minutes, as chunks of marble were moved around and things were vanished and conjured. Eventually, however, a makeshift battle line was created in the cavernous DMLE floor, which was roughly as large as the Hogwarts Great Hall, but without the luxury of an enchanted ceiling or stained glass windows; instead they had the occasional enchanted

window dotting the walls in the large square room. The floor was simple wood panelling, and the walls were bland cream plaster. The Ministry didn't bother with aesthetics where it wasn't appreciated.

The defence lines were relatively simple, Moody observed. The Lift opened up on one wall; several fire hexes were glowing orange in the wood panelling nearby, waiting to be activated. The wizards were crouched opposite the Lift behind a dozen chest-high walls of marble and granite, lined up in six ranks of two walls, with an open corridor of space down the middle; the walls were roughly five feet apart, with the divide down the middle about four feet. At Moody's order, the stragglers who were fortifying the walls with spells vaulted over them and crouched, ready to face whatever was going to come out of the Lift.

There weren't many, just over one hundred of them. About half were Aurors, and most of the remainder were Hit Wizards, with some ministry workers mixed in; Moody picked out Perkins from Arthur's department, as well as, unsurprisingly, Barty Crouch, who was looking ready to kill as he crouched next to the Minister.

Moody limped to the nearest wall and stepped over it, next to the Minister and Shacklebolt, who were training their wands on the innocuous golden grille of the Ministry Lift.

"Whatever comes out of that lift," Scrimgeour shouted, "will show you no mercy. But know that, regardless of what happens today, you did your bit to defend the Ministry. Know that-

He was interrupted by the whirling rush of air that signalled a Portkey – Croaker and ten miscellaneous Unspeakables landed gracefully in the middle of the open area between the defensive walls and lift, dressed in the purple livery of an Unspeakable, having used their intra-Ministry Portkeys.

"We've fixed the Lift's arithmancy, sir," he said, nodding at the Minister. "However, we just detected seven incoming Ministry-approved Portkeys coming from outside. Should we let them in?"

Scrimgeour nodded, knowing it was probably Potter or Black and some Muggles. Croaker waved his wand in a cross-shape, and whispered something under his breath. Several heavily-armed figures materialised, along with one robed figure, and landed in various stages of collapse next to the Unspeakables.

“That’s Sirius Black!” Crouch shouted, raising his wand, only to have Scrimgeour push his arm back down.

“He’s with us,” Scrimgeour said loudly, to some snorts of disbelief. In the desperation of the moment, however, people stayed their hands. Sirius got to his feet, looking slightly dizzy, and helped the Muggle next to him up.

“That was more uncomfortable than normal,” he said, to no one in particular.

“The wards kept you in limbo until we decided to let you in,” explained Croaker, before the Lift pinged and lit up. Croaker swore under his breath and ushered the Muggles and his Unspeakables to the defensive lines; the Muggles took up firing positions, after recovering from their uncomfortable ride, on the first row of walls, along with the Unspeakables and Sirius. The scarlet Aurors dominated the first three rows, and then the DMLE Hit Wizards and normal Ministry workers took up the rear.

The Lift had sprung into action, and lights above it signalled the slow rise of the carriage. It was currently on floor eight; the Atrium. However, it could only go one way now. Floor two.

“Steady...” said Scrimgeour, as he heard a whimper from the back; probably a Ministry worker realising how much danger he was in.

“Ready Patroni,” Moody hissed, his magical eye swirling but unable to see past the Lift’s bright magic; the expansion charms and travel charms swirled across the surface of the metal box like spotlights. “They have some Dementors, according to the scrying screens.”

“When they come up, activate the hexes,” said Shacklebolt. “Lupin, is it full moon?”

Remus, a row behind, shook his head. “Voldemort has potions, however, that can force a transformation. I expect he’s given them to Fenrir and the others.”

“Bugger,” Scrimgeour cursed. “A werewolf can take hits like a giant when it’s enraged.” He turned to his right, looking past Crouch, and signalled to some Aurors on the end of the first row. “You three, try to aim for the werewolves. Use spells which conjure silver. And you,” he pointed at the Muggles, “remember to be careful for-“

The Minister was interrupted by a rush of air and a slight whirring sound which heralded the arrival of an intra-building Portkey.

“Sir!” someone shouted from the back row. “Auror Robson was killed in the Atrium! He had an intra-building Por-“

The rushing sound rose to a crescendo, and two feet above the heads of the crouched defenders a dark, confusing mass of bodies materialised, grasping a long rope: a transfigured intra-building Auror and Unspeakable Portkey.

The bodies immediately plummeted to earth, writhing and screaming as they fell on Aurors, Hit Wizards and defensive walls alike, some with nasty crunching sounds. Several dozen Inferi had been Portkeyed into the room, and as soon as they landed the undead beasts began to thrash and howl, tearing at flesh and lashing out at anyone they landed on. The DMLE department erupted into hand-to-hand violence as the Inferi launched themselves at the nearest people, howling in anger and scrambling over the defensive walls like animals.

Scrimgeour found himself bowled over the wall he had been standing behind when a jabbering Inferius tackled him in the back. He swore and jerked his head back, rewarded by a satisfying crack and the loosening of the Inferius’ grip. He rolled away and fired a vicious cutting curse at a zombie threatening Crouch, who was busy

wrestling with another undead assailant. As he got to his feet, the Inferi who had tackled him grabbed him again, and Scrimgeour got a good look at his attacker.

A grinning skull, barely covered by parchment-like flesh, stared at him through empty eye sockets. Pale hands animated by the Dark Lord's magic groped at Scrimgeour's front, before fastening in an iron grip. The Inferius grasp Scrimgeour firmly by the lapels, and jerked its head forward with a throaty roar, aiming to bite him with broken teeth. Scrimgeour swore again, and thrust his left hand forward, grabbing the Inferius by the throat.

"Confringo!" he spat, and the Inferius' head exploded in a shower of bone and dried gore, covering Scrimgeour's face in rotting flesh, and sending him staggering backwards. Scrimgeour gagged and cursed, before cleaning his face with a simple charm. The room was now in chaos; despite the numerical advantage the Aurors had, the Inferi were doing a lot of damage as Aurors found themselves unable to send curses into the confusing combats that had erupted. Screams, the sounds of cracking bones and the rattle of automatic gunfire echoed throughout the DMLE.

Scrimgeour saw Moody bisect a leering female corpse at the waist, before setting another one, this Inferius only a child, on fire. Next to Moody a Ministry worker, one of the workers that Scrimgeour had memory charmed, was savagely bitten on the cheek by an Inferius. The poor lad screamed for his mother and fell backwards as the monstrous zombie bit him in the throat and tore at his flank with gnarled dirty fingernails.

As the Aurors began to get the upper hand in the vicious hand-to-hand brawl, Scrimgeour heard the ping of the Lift, and the rattle of the golden grille. A wave of devastating cold and despair hit him, and he vaulted over the wall in front of him before turning back to see the Dark Creatures of Lord Voldemort swarm through out of the expanded interior of the Lift, shouting and whooping as they ran. He could see a pair of snarling transformed werewolves sprinting to cover the ground between the Lift and the defensive walls, and Veela transforming into their hideous, fire-throwing alter egos. But what was worse was the cold of the Dementors, although few in number.

You've failed, Rufus, he heard in his mind, as his vision began to cloud. You'll never be an Auror, you just don't have what it takes.

"No..." the Minister whispered, feeling weak as he clutched at the barricade he was now huddled behind, as the Aurors and Hit Wizards beat back the Inferi behind him with fire and magic, the animated corpses no match for the trained professionals.

Better luck next year, if you want to come back, he heard the examiner say in his mind, as he was taken back to his youth, and the day he had failed his first Auror exams. Thick grey fog obscured his vision, and all Rufus could make out was a hovering Dementor, who was floating above the Lift, which was still disgorging its dreadful contents of sprinting figures.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" he heard Moody roar, and a large silver tiger leapt over Scrimgeour's head to charge the Dark Creatures, accompanied by Shackbolt's lynx. Immediately Scrimgeour's vision and head cleared, and sound flooded his senses in a burst of incoherent noise. He heard the crunching of bones and the screams of men and Inferi alike, as well as the whooping and laughter of the oncoming horde. He got to his feet, seeing a black-furred werewolf scant feet from the front lines, heading straight for him.

"Yulisquo!" he hissed, sending a razor-edged silver disc at the werewolf's drooling snout. It sliced into the beast's cheek, causing it to whimper in pain as the wound sizzled and began to steam. However the monster kept on coming, and Scrimgeour yelled in fury as it leapt the barricade with one bound, and slammed into the Minister. Scrimgeour raised his wand, a curse on his lips, and the battle was on.

Moody backhanded a snarling Inferius with his left hand, shouting a curse as he did so and sending the creature flying backwards with a shattered skull. He then deftly flicked his wand, transfiguring a chunk of steaming undead flesh into a silver blade, which he Banished into the flank of a werewolf pinning the Minister down near the front of the

defensive line. The werewolf howled in agony and fell sideways, clawing at the sizzling dagger, as the Minister got to his feet and kicked it in the jaw, before setting the beast on fire. Moody's magical eye whizzed behind him to see another Inferius lunging at him; he didn't even turn around, instead lashing out backwards with his wooden leg, which was now fully articulated, crushing the foul creature's kneecaps before it could reach him.

"Come on!" he shouted at the Aurors nearby, who were finishing off the stragglers of the initial Inferi attack, "rally and fight back!"

Moody himself was roughly three walls behind the front of the defence lines, and so swiftly vaulted over one, stepping over a twitching Inferius, and sent a powerful piercing curse at a Death Eater at the back of the room; the oscillating purple bolt struck true, shooting through the oncoming horde of monsters and powering into the man's abdomen, completely shattering the Death Eater's azure shield. Moody smiled to himself, his scarred face twisting into a grin, and shot off three quick curses at a nearby werewolf, which was about to lunge at Crouch, who was grappling with a keening winged Veela.

Moody realised the defensive walls were going to do more harm than good at the rate things were going; Aurors were falling backwards over them trying to dodge, and being unable to manoeuvre in this kind of fight was a killer. He spun backwards and waved his wand in a languid arc, managing to Vanish the stone walls easily, as he had helped to create them. There were shouts of shock from the Aurors, some of whom found their cover gone, but the volume of spellfire immediately increased as they all spread out. The Dark Creatures were still attempting to push through the front line of men; Shackbolt, the Minister and Crouch among them, with the Muggles firing indiscriminately into the fray as Black shielded them as best he could.

"BACK UP!" Moody bellowed, firing off a vicious cutting hex over the head of an Auror in front of him. One quick glance with his magical eye told him the initial Inferi were all dead (again), and some Ministry

workers were frantically transfiguring the corpses into black marbles, so as to free up the wooden floor for the Aurors to move.

Moody ducked a large orange fireball thrown from a random Veela, wincing as he heard the howls of a Hit Wizard behind him who was hit in the face by it and knocked to the floor. He then shouldered past an Auror who was frantically firing weak Patroni over the heads of the combatants at an eerily floating Dementor, and rugby tackled the screeching Veela, with both of them falling to the floor, swiftly surrounded and trod on by a forest of legs. Moody, on his knees, grabbed a hunk of the Veela's dirty blonde hair and slammed the bird-woman's beak into the floor, before nailing her in the face with a powerful Bludgeoning curse at point blank range. He then lashed out with his elbow at the nearest Inferius' legs – barely legs, more raw bone, and set the beast on fire before scrambling to his feet, slightly unsteady on his wooden leg.

“Moody...” he heard something hiss behind him, and his magical eye whirled backwards as he was buffeted by the sea of struggling figures; the Dark Creatures had truly engulfed the beleaguered Aurors and Hit Wizards now, and it was less a magical duel than a series of brutal melee fights. He saw a Dementor with swords for arms glide over the heads of the combatants in his direction. With a shout, Moody lashed out at the bodies pressing into him with a powerful Repulsion charm, clearing himself a small circle, whereby he leapt upwards in a magically-assisted move as the Dementor swooped down and stabbed forwards with its blades. The swords passed just under Moody's foot and wooden leg, as he somersaulted forwards over the bulk of the battle towards the rear of the room, next to the Lift. The Dementor banked around sharply in mid air and made a beeline for Moody, who landed perfectly just outside the bulk of the combat. Moody spat and ducked a clumsy swing from a nearby Inferius, before setting the creature on fire and Banishing it at the Dementor, who was forced to dodge.

The next few seconds for Moody were a whirl of movement, teeth, fur and hot breath as a werewolf slammed into him from the side, sending him careening into the Lift. As the magical grille slowly shut, the werewolf pinned Moody down with its paws and drooled on his face; Moody looked it in the eye with both of his, and smiled nastily.

The Lift door shut entirely, and there was a ping, ringing clearly over the din of the conflict in the DMLE. At the same time as the ping, Moody clicked his fingers, activating the fire hexes laid by the Hit Wizards. A rush of heat and bright light blasted through the grille, singeing the werewolf's back and causing it to whine in pain and roll off of Moody, who jabbed his wand into its gut and shouted a curse, sending a spray of silver flechettes thudding into the canine's unprotected stomach. As the werewolf spasmed and howled, Moody got to his feet and brought his wand down in an axe-like motion, whispering a spell as he did so, and severed the wolf's head from its body in a burst of blood, which peppered the decorated wall of the Lift and covered the polished floor of the small space in thick red fluid. Moody jabbed a button, opening the Lift door again, and readied his wand, before launching himself back into the fray. As he grabbed an Inferius by the scruff of the neck, he saw that the battle had separated out somewhat, and the sword-armed Dementor was duelling Shacklebolt and the Minister in the centre of the room, both men armed with transfigured swords.

Kingsley desperately blocked another strike from the Dementor, nearly falling over with the jarring shock of the blow. His transfigured steel longsword was unfamiliar in his hands; however he had quickly found magical shielding was like rice paper under the Dementor's furious sword attacks. The Minister, at his side, lunged forward with his own conjured blade, but the Dementor hissed and parried the attack easily. Kingsley felt fatigue beginning to set in, along with the constant cold buzz of despair that accompanied the Dementors that were flying around the room, dodging Patroni.

As he leapt backwards to dodge a cut aimed at his stomach, he was knocked sideways by a flailing Auror, who was trying desperately to stem the flow of blood from his neck where a werewolf had savaged him. Kingsley fell hard to the ground, his longsword clattering from his hands and skittering across the wooden floor of the DMLE, only to be swiftly obscured by a sea of moving feet. He rolled onto his back to see the Dementor floating above him, sword-arm raised to strike.

The Dementor's arm jabbed downwards at Kingsley's chest, but before it could connect the Dementor was struck by an orange spell, setting its black rotting robes alight.

"Over here!" Scrimgeour shouted, swinging his sword with his left hand as he fired another Incendio at the Dementor, which missed and hit an Inferius who was trying to strangle a Hit wizard. The Dementor screamed, a horrific hissing howl, and another pair of arms shot out of its robes to pat out the growing flames. Kingsley struggled to his feet and fired off a cutting curse of his own, which hit the Dementor in the back and sliced into its robes, rewarding Kingsley with a spurt of grey blood.

The Dementor spluttered, before taking to the air and heading for the Lift, dripping blood from its smouldering robes. Kingsley looked over the heads of the struggling fighters between him and the Lift, and saw Moody pursue the Dementor into the Lift, with the grille shutting as Moody fired off a series of spells at the Dementor's back in the confined space.

As he watched, Kingsley let his guard down, and was rewarded with a vicious bite on his left arm from an Inferius; he yelled in pain as the Inferius tore a hunk of flesh from his upper arm, and brought his wand around to blast the foul creature high into the air, with it crashing to earth somewhere across the room. Kingsley nursed his arm and waved his wand over the bleeding wound, and managed to stem the flow with some basic medical magic. He gasped and struggled for air as he looked around the room, seeing people and monsters fighting for their lives. From what he could see the Ministry wizards had the upper hand, but it was at a terrible toll.

An Auror lay on the ground, trying frantically to knit his torn stomach flesh back together with tears in his eyes. A Ministry worker was howling in pain as she clutched at a broken arm, bone jutting from her elbow. One of the Muggles was dead nearby, his face a steaming mess of cooked meat as the result of a Veela's fireball.

Kingsley exhaled noisily as he felt the pain in his arm recede; the limb was sluggish and numb, and he wished he knew how to heal himself beyond battlefield makeshift wandwork. Then a Veela, one of the few

left alive, locked eyes with him from scant feet away, having dispatched the Auror she had been fighting. Kingsley felt a sudden urge to dance, to do something to impress the avian beast in front of him. The Veela then jerked her arms and two balls of flame appeared in her palms, and she opened her serrated beak to let out a cry like a strangled crow. Kingsley shook his head, feeling as though he was under water, and barely managed to throw himself to one side to avoid the two blasts of white-hot flame that the Veela sent his way. He bumped into an Auror in the mess of struggling bodies surrounding him and staggered, before the Veela was upon him, her beak jabbing forward into his shoulder, burying deep into his flesh. Kingsley screamed and punched the bird-woman in the side of the head, but his wand was knocked out of his hand by the Veela's sinewy feathered arm. They both fell backwards, the Veela's beak dripping with viscera, and Kingsley groaned and coughed in pain as the bird-woman began to strangle him, screeching viciously. His vision blurred and dimmed, before there was a flash of red fire from the Veela's hands and everything went black.

Hogsmeade, several minutes earlier

The Muggle encampment was dimly lit by artificial lights in the dying autumn night, with most of the men in the main mess tent eating their dinner. A pair of mechanics were servicing the Warrior assault vehicles to ensure they would run smoothly when they had to be used. Four men were on patrol in two pairs, trudging up and down the gentle hills surrounding Hogsmeade. Hogwarts herself was barely visible in the distance, lit up like a Christmas tree against the dark purple sky.

No one heard the rush of wind which signalled a mass Portkey, as it was muffled by the thick Forbidden Forest, and no one felt the subtle rumbling of movement that heralded the arrival of the two giants, Krakus and Guter, whom Voldemort had convinced to fight for him. Despite being trained professionals, luck was not on the Muggles' side.

It took the launching of a massive rocky boulder into the encampment to raise the alarm, which smashed into the medical tent and killed the

medic inside instantly. The men of the Magical Pacification Force scrambled from their tents and grabbed their weapons, before leaping into the various vehicles in the motor pool and starting them up, to cries of “Contact!” and “They’re in the trees! Fire!”

Lord Voldemort had arrived at Hogsmeade. As he strode through the tall trees of the Forest, he smiled a grim smile, knowing his minions would be arriving at the Ministry building at that very moment.

Tonight, the pure and strong would inherit the earth.

Chapter Thirty – You Again?

Lord Voldemort had arrived at Hogsmeade. As he strode through the tall trees of the Forest, he smiled a grim smile, knowing his minions would be arriving at the Ministry building at that very moment.

Tonight, the pure and strong would inherit the earth.

“CONTACT!”

“Enemies in the treeline gentlemen, shoot to kill!”

“Get to the vehicles! Someone warn the castle!”

“Get RAF Oban on the blower, they know the codes!”

The Muggle encampment had exploded into activity as soon as they realised they were under attack. Armed men had streamed from the mess tent to take up firing positions, with automatic gunfire spraying into the Forbidden Forest treeline next to the Hogsmeade ruins. The Forest was lit up with muzzle flash and bursts of bright multicoloured light as the Death Eaters shielded from the bullets, although screams of pain were audible as shots hit home. The Muggles were relatively well defended – spells were very easy to see and the relatively long distance between the encampment and the treeline meant dodging wasn't difficult. The shadowy shapes of the two giants had now become clear, and two communications officers were shouting updates into their radios.

“Yes sir, giants! We're under attack! What do you mean the Wizard Ministry is as well? Bollocks, we'll retreat to the castle and alert them. You're breaking up sir. Sir? Shit,” one of them cursed, slapping his radio backpack set as static feedback rushed into his headphones. “Did you managed to get through to RAF Oban?” he said to his partner, who had been reciting codes off of a sheet of paper into his headset.

“Yeah,” he said, ducking his head as a particularly strong spell detonated nearby, throwing up a plume of dirt. The motor pool vehicles had now all been started up and people were beginning to board them; the Warriors’ 30mm autocannons were now sending large-calibre shells at the silhouettes of the giants, who were tossing stones with wild abandon at the collection of tents. A thick purple shield absorbed the heavy weapons fire, protecting the giants from the torrent of firepower directed at them.

“I got through to them; they’re sending some attack choppers. ETA isn’t going to be quick – this place isn’t exactly on the map,” the communications officer replied, shouldering his pack and gesturing to his friend to run to the motor pool. They sprinted, heads down and pistols drawn, as multicoloured jets of light shrieked overhead and the sky darkened. They leapt onto the back of a waiting jeep, and the camp commander stuck his head out of the top of one of the Warrior APCs, waving for the vehicles to drive towards the castle. With a screeching of tyres and a rumbling of tracks, the vehicles shifted into gear and slewed around, before gunning their engines up the hill towards Hogwarts, leaving the Death Eaters and giants behind. One of the jeeps was nearly hit by a boulder, but managed to swerve expertly at the last moment.

“Casualties?” the radio in the front of the jeep squawked. After some radio chatter, barely audible over the collective roar of engines, it was ascertained that only two people had died; the medical officer, and one man who had been clipped by a Killing Curse. Just over two dozen Muggles were fighting fit and riding in their small convoy of six jeeps and two tracked Warrior APCs. Hogwarts’ gates loomed, with the famous winged boars looking imperiously down at the Muggle vehicles. As the lead Warrior approached, the gates opened of their own accord, and the Muggle vehicles passed through, the engines cutting out and spluttering for a brief moment as they passed the major defensive wards; the charm-work that the Ministry workers had done on the jeeps held, however, and the vehicles swiftly restarted and sped up the gravel path towards the glittering castle. A pair of Ravenclaw sixth years walking through the grounds towards the castle screamed in horror as they were lit up by the headlights of the leading APC, and dived to one side as the convoy rushed past.

The front doors of the school opened as they passed the Whomping Willow and Hagrid's house, and the distinctive silhouette of Albus Dumbledore stood, alone, illuminated by the torches in the Entrance Hall.

Dumbledore had known of Lord Voldemort's assault as soon as the wards in Hogsmeade had tripped, lighting up his office with red warning lights. He had slowly walked down to the entrance hall, and now finally stood alone on the front steps, watching the growing dots of light signalling the arrival of the Muggle transport vehicles. In the distance faint lights and movement could be seen, but Hogsmeade was largely obscured from view.

The convoy finally reached the front door and came to a gentle halt, crunching on the gravel path. The top hatch of the lead Warrior popped open, and the commander of that contingent of the Magical Pacification Force stuck his head out, ignoring the growing mob of gawking students, teachers and ghosts that were assembling behind the Headmaster, who was looking grim.

"Are they here?" Dumbledore said gravely, pulling his wand out of his garish magenta and yellow robes. He wanted, truly he did, for it to be a false alarm.

The commander nodded, and Dumbledore's face darkened.

"Commander, take the majority of your men inside the castle to defend the Entrance Hall. Use your vehicles to harass the enemy in the grounds. They will come up through the front gate. Do whatever you must to repel them."

"Sir," the commander said, looking conspicuous in the eyes of all the children behind the Headmaster. "We saw huge shapes. I think they were giants."

"We will deal with them," Dumbledore said calmly, thinking of Charlie Weasley and his dragon, hidden in the Forest. "Minerva!" he

called, looking back inside the castle. "Get the Heads of Houses to take their students to the dormitories. Seal the rooms, activate the defences. Seventh years... seventh years can fight, but it is their choice. They are of age." Professor McGonagall nodded, her mouth a severe line, and signalled for the Heads of Houses to do the same. Dumbledore caught Snape's eye for a long moment. Snape nodded at the Headmaster, and Dumbledore nodded back. It was time for Severus Snape to declare his loyalties.

"Nick," Dumbledore said, turning to the aristocratically-dressed, "take the ghosts and patrol the corridors. You know what to do if you see anything. Tell Peeves to monitor the Room of Requirement."

He looked back at the commander, and there was a short pause.

"Men!" the commander shouted back to the silent convoy, "dismount and help these wizards to fortify the Entrance Hall of the castle. Drivers and gunners stay in your vehicles; flank them when they come up the hill. Shoot to kill, gentlemen."

Dumbledore nodded at him, and strode out of the castle, past the vehicles, to stand alone in the middle of the darkened path, a dimly illuminated old man in the middle of a vast set of grounds, dwarfed by the majesty of Hogwarts Castle.

He raised his wand, most of the students, ghosts, teachers and Muggles still looking on despite their orders, and whispered an imperceptible spell. The Headmaster of Hogwarts glowed with an eerie light blue glow for an instant, and then there was a roar of noise. Hogwarts herself lit up with a similar bright blue light, before it faded as quickly as it had appeared. Everywhere across the castle, staircases locked into default positions, trick steps vanished and shortcuts sealed themselves shut with a deafening grating sound. In the bowels of the castle various secret passages slowly locked closed, and the lake seethed with movement as the merpeople responded to the Headmaster's signal, and rose to just under the surface, armed with tridents and nets. But the most dramatic change was the suits of armour; they all, as one, stepped out of their niches and off of their

pedestals and assumed defensive positions, ready to meet any attacker that entered their corridors.

Hogwarts rumbled and pulsed with magic. It was ready for the battle to come. The gates, the mighty winged boars, crackled with electrical energy, and Hagrid stood outside his cabin, armed with his impossibly large crossbow. The centaurs felt the rush of energy and knew the time had come, and deep in the forest the Acromantulae, the Hungarian Horntail and even the sentient Ford Anglia sensed something was amiss. Every sentient creature in the Forest and grounds felt the surge of power that the Headmaster had brought to the castle.

After two shocked seconds of silence, Dumbledore slowly turned back to look at the congregation of wizards and Muggles, before they were jolted into action and began to move to their various places. The vehicles roared to life, before moving off to take up positions to the left and right of the main doors, with the two Warrior APCs sitting in the middle of the main footpath leading to the castle, their guns primed.

Dumbledore walked back to the castle doors, where Snape now stood, his arms folded. Behind him the Entrance Hall seethed with activity, with students rushing to their common rooms and seventh-years, along with teachers, casting spells to fortify the building.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said, placing his hand on the Potions Master’s shoulder. “For all you have endured in this, I thank you. But now I must ask one last thing of you – to stand with us.”

Snape looked at Dumbledore, and nodded at him silently. Both men then turned to go into the Castle, with Snape having to chivvy along Ron and Hermione, who were trying to hang around and look inconspicuous. Dumbledore’s heart was heavy, looking at the two thirteen year olds. Their best friend was the lynchpin to all this fighting, and they had no idea what the Headmaster had done to him, what Dumbledore had forced onto the poor boy. The curse of undeath, with the responsibilities of the Chosen One.

Sometimes one had to just take a moment to think how one had ended up where they were. Dumbledore felt that now. Tom Riddle, misreading the signs, hoping the boy would turn out all right... seeing him destroy himself, warp his face, ask for a teaching place at Hogwarts... all the mistakes and foolish decisions of the First War, with people dying left right and centre, and no one but him strong enough to go toe to toe with the most dangerous man ever to have lived... then the little baby boy, Harry, looking death in the face and striking it down.

And now... the boy becoming a time traveller, experiencing a horrific future, and coming back into the past to shake things up. Freeing false prisoners, hunting Horcruxes, battling dragons, Dementors and Dark Lords... Dumbledore shook his head, feeling every one of his 152 years acutely as he watched his staff fortify the castle.

He felt a nagging feeling at the back of his mind, like he had forgotten something. Something... important, about Hogsmeade. He had been dreadfully upset about the whole thing, he remembered, when the village had burned. Of course, now he had got together with Rosmerta...

Dumbledore shook himself out of his reverie. This was, as they would say, it. He brushed off his robes, and strode towards Professor McGonagall, who was trying unsuccessfully to activate a runic inscription Dumbledore himself had carved the previous day. With a flick of his wand the complex glyph glowed a deep red colour, lighting up the surrounding patch of stone on the wall it was on.

Hogwarts herself thrummed with power, ready to repel the invaders that would try to take her. No-one had ever succeeded.

However, there was a first time for everything.

“My Lord, the Muggles have fled,” a faceless Inner Circle member said, nodding his silver-masked head respectfully at Voldemort. Voldemort, resplendent in deep black embroidered robes, barely gave the man a glance as he strode from the Forbidden Forest down into the ruins of Hogsmeade and the Muggle encampment, which

was now deserted. At his back were innumerable Death Eaters, and the two giants. One of them had tried to follow the Muggles – Voldemort had simply effortlessly levitated the stupid beast and stopped it moving, until it understood that he was in command.

“Bellatrix,” he hissed, and the medusa-faced witch scampered up from the crowd to stand by her Lord’s side. “Bellatrix, start the transportation spell. I will observe and assist.”

Bellatrix nodded respectfully, before shouting at a pair of nearby Death Eaters to assist her; the rest of them huddled in a black and white mass, waiting for something to happen. The giants brooded over the group, hunched over slightly and awaiting orders. Bellatrix whipped her wand left and right in a wave-like motion, as the group walked into the remains of the Muggle encampment; some of the weaker-minded Death Eaters idly set fire to the empty tents and stamped on discarded equipment, while the Inner Circle and Voldemort himself stood passively watching Bellatrix. After several seconds of wand waving a pale glowing golden ball of light appeared in the air, where the portrait from the Hog’s Head had once hung, before Hogsmeade was destroyed. Voldemort smiled a cold smile, and languidly waved his wand. The golden ball of light expanded into a doorway shape, which then extended to be a large rectangle of golden light.

“Excellent work, Bellatrix,” he said quietly, and Bellatrix bowed her head, flush with anticipation behind her mask. With one curt gesture, he sent his Death Eaters en masse through the glowing portal, before nodding to the pair of giants to move on the castle, and stepping through himself. The journey was not unpleasant, but was unusual, like walking through a soft wall of feathers, with the ground slightly sticky underfoot. Voldemort blinked after several seconds, and emerged in a vast, entirely empty room, large enough for the mass of Death Eaters to comfortably stand. The Room of Requirement was apparently in a “neutral” mode at present. Several odd items, such as bacon sandwiches, lewd Muggle magazines, and comfortable chairs were appearing next to random Death Eaters, the product of their stray thoughts being picked up by the Room. Voldemort’s expression

darkened, and the Room itself became gloomier, and all the random items vanished.

“In a moment,” he began in a quiet but firm voice, instantly silencing any idle chatter, “I will open the door of this room. From that moment on, you are to cause as much havoc, destruction, and death as is possible. We are here to sack and seize this castle, as our fellows are doing right now at the Ministry of Magic. My Death Eaters, this night we inherit the Magical World as its rightful, pure keepers.”

A cheer went up at that, with several wands sparking in excitement. Voldemort walked through the crowd of his followers, with them parting to give him plenty of room, and the ornately-masked Inner Circle flocked to surround him. He walked towards the unassuming wooden door on one of the walls of the Room, and stood in front of it, all eyes on his back.

Lord Voldemort raised his wand, and pressed it gently into the centre of the door, before pausing for a long moment.

He opened his mouth, and breathed an almost inaudible spell.

“Confringo.”

The door to the Room of Requirement glowed a brilliant white for one fleeting second, before exploding with a screeching bang and a shower of stone shards and wooden splinters. It flew into the opposite wall and set alight the tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy. Voldemort walked slowly out of the door, seeing a terrified, hovering, poltergeist looking at him.

“Peeves,” he said by way of a greeting, remembering the electoplasmic pest from his own school days.

Peeves squeaked in terror and dove through the floor, out of the way of the swarms of Death Eaters that had run from the Room into Hogwarts’ hallowed carpeted corridors. Whoops and shrieks of delight echoed through the hallways as the Death Eaters scattered into rooms and branching corridors, leaving Voldemort relatively

alone with four of his Inner Circle, including Bellatrix. As swiftly as they had vanished, Voldemort then heard the sound of clashing metal and booming spellfire; evidently the old man had prepared some resistance.

“With me,” he said to his Inner Circle members.

“Let’s go to Gryffindor Tower, master, we can play with them...” Bellatrix said, barely restraining herself with all the pandemonium that had begun to reign in the castle; breaking glass was clearly audible, as were shouted spells. She sounded breathless, and was twitching slightly. At her side her husband laid his silver hand on her shoulder, restraining her gently.

Voldemort smiled a cold smile. “An excellent idea, Bellatrix. I’ve always wanted to visit their Common Room.”

The Fat Lady was a magical portrait, and thus gifted with some meagre intelligence, but it was very limited in scope and memory in a lot of areas. She had been told, by a very harried Professor McGonagall, that the castle was under attack and that she wasn’t to let in anyone, even teachers, unless they had the exact password, which she had personally changed. Polyjuice potion and Glamours could lead to the Tower becoming a charnel house if Death Eaters were loosed on the children cowering within.

Portraits couldn’t really feel emotion, but the Fat Lady still looked terrified as Lord Voldemort and four of his Inner Circle emerged from a main hallway, the still-smoking body of an Auror lying discarded at their feet, and began to walk towards the portrait. One of them was limping slightly; the Auror had put up a fight.

“What do you think the password is, Bellatrix?” Voldemort said, wiping blood from his hand, and smiling in a dangerously self-assured manner. The battle for Hogwarts was going decidedly in the Dark Lord’s favour. He had stalked the corridors for several minutes, knowing that the bulk of the action was around the Great Hall, main staircase and Entrance Hall, but saw that his Death Eaters had

overrun the majority of the castle in their surprise attack. Outside the chatter of Muggle gunfire could be heard clearly, along with the roaring of the giants as they absorbed bullets and chased the roving Muggle vehicles. Disturbingly he had glimpsed spurts of fire; apparently Dumbledore had a dragon on the grounds, which was being ordered around by that oaf Rubeus.

“Well... I would hazard a guess at...” Bellatrix tapped her silver mask with her wand, head cocked and looking at the portrait of the Fat Lady, who was white-faced but defiant.

“Password?” she said, with a morbid calm.

Bellatrix paused, before pointing her wand at the painting.

“Rempus!” she shouted, and the Fat Lady’s eyes widened for one brief second before she was hit by a jagged bolt of orange lightning, which tore the portrait into fragments of canvas in a frame. The portrait door swung open after a few seconds, a gaping square frame where the guardian of Gryffindor Tower had once hung.

“Good choice of spell,” Rodolphus remarked, patting his wife on the shoulder. He moved to enter the portrait hole, until the sound of someone clearing their throat loudly made him pause.

Voldemort and the Inner Circle members turned to see a figure at the end of the corridor, standing next to the recently-deceased Auror, whose corpse was still giving off steam.

The man was dressed in blinding white robes, with not a spot of blood or dust on them. His mask was a parody of the Death Eaters’ own; black instead of white, and as faceless as the average Death Eater was. In his gloved hand was a wand, and a shock of black hair could be seen under the mask. Some of the skin of his neck was visible, but it was disturbingly pale, as pale as an Inferius.

“Can I help you?” Voldemort said, languidly moving to raise his wand at the stranger.

“You certainly can!” the man responded jovially, raising his wand. Voldemort tensed, unsure of what the strange man would do. There was a pause, before the strange man spoke.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Several Minutes Earlier...

The Entrance Hall had been a study in tense silence, in the moments leading up to the Death Eaters’ invasion. The sounds of gunfire could be heard outside of the sealed doors of the Castle, but nothing was able to be seen. Giants’ roars were audible through the thick wood, and the roar of engines, but no sounds of spellfire. Dumbledore, standing on the imposing steps leading to the main staircase, looked as though he was at afternoon tea, a strong contrast to the teachers, students, Aurors and Muggles flanking him on the stairs and balconies overlooking the Entrance Hall. They were a range of emotions; nauseous, stern, determined, terrified, resigned. Professor McGonagall was looking murderous, as though the mere fact the Death Eaters had dared to invade had signed their death warrant; while Professor Sprout was looking extremely apprehensive about the whole endeavour.

There was a ripple of shock and surprise when Peeves, the poltergeist whom most of the room had had an unpleasant experience with at one point or another in their magical education, shot through the wall, gibbering madly.

“PROFESSORHEAD DUMBLEDORE!” he screeched, waving his arms madly as he flew towards Dumbledore. “He-Who-We-Shouldn’t-Say-Anything-About is in the castle! The Room of Requirement!” Peeves gabbled, his bow-tie whirling in mad circles; apparently the little ghost man was scared for the first time. Dumbledore nodded, a frown appearing on his face.

“Did you see how many followers he had?”

Peeves counted on his fingers for a moment, brow furrowed in concentration, before shrugging with a hopeless look on his face. "Lots."

Dumbledore nodded, waving the poltergeist away. He motioned for some of the Professors and Muggle soldiers to remain where they were, before heading off with the majority of the Aurors and some of the senior Professors. They swiftly vanished out of sight, and seconds later the sounds of shouted spells and screams of pain, accompanied by terrific bangs and crashes, were clearly heard over the noise of the battle outside. Muggles and Professors stood uneasily for several seconds, looking at each other, before scattering out of the Entrance Hall to hunt the Death Eaters in the corridors of the school.

As most of them began to leave, there was a rush of air and a white-robed man with a black mask appeared via Portkey, along with several soldiers from the Magical Pacification Squad. Several defenders pointed their wands and guns at him, but the Muggle commander told them to stand down, recognising his men – he had known they were on a mission. The white robed man nodded at the commander, before sprinting up the stairs past some confused seventh-years.

Harry Potter had arrived at Hogwarts.

"It's Dumbledore!" a Death Eater several floors up shouted, seeing Dumbledore and several Professors and Aurors rush into the main stairwell. "Get him!"

Killing Curses and other nasty spells rained down from above, as Dumbledore shouted at the people next to him to get back. He waved his wand, conjuring a sheet of metal like an umbrella to absorb the spells. Where the Killing Curses hit, the metal buckled and melted with a green flame, but the defence otherwise held.

Professor Flitwick, as soon as the metal shield vanished by Dumbledore's hand, ran into the main stairwell and launched himself upwards with a magically-assisted bound, somersaulting up four

floors in one go through the gap in the middle of the staircase. He landed gracefully next to three Death Eaters, before sending them flying backwards into the wall with one wave of his wand. There were several cracks and howls of pain from behind the masks, and Flitwick frowned, before sprinting off down the fourth-floor corridor he was on.

Dumbledore himself strode up the staircase, with several Aurors at his side. At each floor a fair number of them split off, aiming to flush out any Death Eaters that were wandering around, while Dumbledore idly deflected any attacks from above, and incapacitated anyone foolish enough to rush out from the protection of their corridors and attack him head on. He looked down the stairs when he was on the third floor, and saw Harry rush out from the Entrance Hall and barrel up the stairs, ignoring Aurors who shouted for him to stop. In seconds Harry had reached Dumbledore, who was in the middle of a staircase.

“I just got back from the Riddle Mansion,” he said, completely unfazed from his run; lactic acid build up was hardly damaging for him now. “The place is burning to the ground; Voldemort has attacked the Ministry and, obviously, here.”

“I noticed, my boy,” Dumbledore said quietly, expertly deflecting a Decapitating Curse from a Death Eater two floors above, who was leaning over the banister. Harry took aim and sent a vicious jet of steam at the Death Eater – the man was engulfed in boiling water and howled in pain, pitching forward over the banister and falling down several floors to land, with a crunch, on the floor below.

“I just met Nick,” Harry said, as though nothing had happened. “He said Voldemort was headed to Gryffindor Tower with some of the Inner Circle.”

Dumbledore’s face dropped. “Harry, please... don’t confront them alone.” He waved a hand at Harry’s body, “You have already lost before.”

“Come with me then!”

“I can’t,” he said, gesturing to the staircase. “My priorities are to keep this stairwell open for the Aurors to move around on – we are vastly outnumbered, and mobility and the castle herself are some of the only advantages we have.” As if to prove his point, a staircase abruptly moved when four Death Eaters attempted to run onto it from a fifth-floor corridor – they fell with surprised shouts onto the carpeted stairs below, where Harry and Dumbledore were standing. Several well placed spells later, and the Death Eaters were reduced to transfigured lumps of rock, which Harry tossed over the banister.

“I’m going,” he said to Dumbledore from behind his mask. “I can beat him, and I can end all this.”

There was a piercing scream from one of the corridors below them – the unmistakable sounds of someone being subjected to the Cruciatus.

“Go help them,” Harry urged, before running up the stairs towards Gryffindor Tower. Dumbledore gave him one last look, before turning and running down the stairs towards the screams.

Harry rushed down the corridor of classrooms branching off of the stairs which lead to Gryffindor tower, stepping over the bodies of two Aurors and a Death Eater on the way. The castle was being wrecked – several portraits were on fire and nearly all the windows he passed were broken. The portraits themselves were egging him on – they could evidently tell he was not a Death Eater, despite the get-up he was in.

“SMITE THESE FOUL INTRUDERS!” Sir Cadogan howled, riding along on his overweight pony to keep up with Harry’s blisteringly fast sprinting. “Take them down sir knight, take them down!”

Harry rounded a corner, and saw a Death Eater with his back to Harry who was defacing a tapestry with crude graffiti. Harry, not breaking his stride, raised his wand and fired a spell at the back of the Death Eater’s head, blowing the man’s skull apart and showering the ornate tapestry in brain and fragments of bone. He dodged the

corpse as it toppled to the ground and reached the branch-off to Gryffindor Tower, which was marked by the smouldering body of an Auror. He stepped over it, regretfully noting the corpse was that of Dawlish, one of the senior Aurors, and looked into the corridor.

Lord Voldemort and four of his masked Inner Circle members were talking to the Fat Lady; as Harry watched one of them, Bellatrix judging by the body shape, ripped the portrait to pieces with a spell. As her husband, distinguished by his silver hand, attempted to enter the broken entrance hole, Harry cleared his throat. Voldemort and his followers turned around at the sound of his voice.

“Can I help you?” Voldemort said, raising his wand, his eye trained on Harry. His hair hung over his face, casting a shadow over it; only his glinting eyes could be clearly seen.

“You certainly can!” Harry replied, raising his wand. Voldemort visibly tensed. Harry paused for a moment, visualising the hatred he had for the man.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Meanwhile...

Severus Snape had headed off after Flitwick, branching off from the main stairs as soon as possible. He walked, batlike and brooding, down a side corridor which was lined with DADA classrooms, heading towards the sound of laughter, screams and breaking glass. He entered one of the classrooms to find two Death Eaters and a Slytherin seventh-year student, Marcus Flint (a boy so monumentally stupid he had had to repeat a year), banishing glass beakers at a terrified fifth year Ravenclaw, who had been doing some hard late-night extra studying, if the books on an overturned desk were anything to go by, and had missed the emergency.

“Severus!” one of the Death Eaters said by way of a greeting, removing his mask to reveal Flint senior, a bullish man with very little morals. “Come join us! I was thinking of getting this little Mudblood

nice and bloody first, before we have our fun!" he looked lecherously at the girl, and Snape felt a wave of revulsion. He drew out his wand, nodding at Flint and levitating a conjured glass beaker. Both Flints and the masked Death Eater looked on as he took careful aim at the sobbing girl, who had several shallow cuts on her arm and neck where she had tried to defend herself. With a blur of movement, Snape then turned and launched the beaker at Flint senior's face, with it smashing directly into the man's eye and causing him to fall backwards, scrabbling at his glass-encrusted face and howling with pain. The other Death Eater acted quickly; Snape had to give the masked man credit as he immediately fired off a Killing Curse at the Potions Master. Snape simply sidestepped the green Curse, before replying with one of his own.

"Sectumsempra!" he hissed, and the Death Eater's mask crumpled as a line was sliced into it by the purple spell, blood spurting from the wound as the Death Eater slumped to his knees and pitched forward, twitching.

Marcus Flint merely looked on, slacked jawed in dumb surprise. Snape walked over to him, deftly snatching his wand and snapping it over his knee.

"Fifty points from Slytherin, Flint," he said coldly, before firing a stunner into Flint's forehead. The boy fell backwards, his face still betraying his shock. Snape looked at the girl, before Disillusioning her with a skilled wave of his wand.

"Hide here Miss Yates, do not move. Do not touch them," he said, nodding at the dead Death Eater and a sobbing Flint Senior, who was clutching his bloodied face and weeping. Snape stunned the elder Flint and left with a whirl of his black cape. The rest of the Death Eaters needed to be made painfully aware of Severus Snape's allegiances.

Albus Dumbledore stood over the body of a nondescript Death Eater, a grim, hard look on his face as the corpse shrivelled and melted under his wand. The seventh year the dead man had been torturing,

a pretty Hufflepuff whom Dumbledore recognised, was lying dead next to her killer. Dumbledore sighed and looked up, down the corridor, and saw a pair of Inner Circle members watching him in silence.

“Hello, gentlemen,” he said quietly, nodding at them. “Torsley and... Poole?” he shook his head with a sigh, as the Inner Circle members stiffened. “Forgive me, you two were always rather exceptional at Defence Against the Dark Arts, but I fear this is something you should reconsider. I did oversee your magical education, after all.”

“Quiet, you muggleloving freak,” spat Torsley, a man in a mask resembling a snarling demon. Poole, in a plainer silver mask, raised his wand and began to shout a spell. Dumbledore closed his eyes with a tired, heavy sigh. The corridor flashed with golden light and there was a sound like screeching metal, and when the light faded, Torsley and Poole were bound and gagged, upside down, hanging from the ceiling. Dumbledore shook his head and with a wave of his hand both Death Eaters fell unconscious.

Dumbledore walked on, leaving his former students behind, and re-entered the main staircase. It was relatively quiet, with Aurors guarding the corridor entrances. The majority of the fighting, judging by the roars and screams, was in the corridors of Hogwarts herself.

Remembering what Harry had said, Dumbledore walked up a floor, nodding gravely to the Aurors and Professor Sinistra, who were guarding that particular entrance, and headed for Gryffindor Tower. After he had turned a corner, he felt the wards shudder with magical reverberation, and heard a colossal explosion from ahead of him – the burning body of an Inner Circle member shot out from around a blind corner and crashed into the wall. Dumbledore pulled out his wand from his garish robes and walked around the corner...

Minutes Earlier...

“Avada Kedavra!”

Voldemort hissed at the sudden attack, and conjured a ball of black marble and hurled it magically at the Killing Curse; upon impact it exploded into fine dust, and the curse's crackling green energy was dissipated. Harry followed up with a devastating bolt of blue electricity, which slammed into an unknown limping Inner Circle member and lifted the man off of his feet, launching him through the ruined portrait hole. Voldemort fired a Killing Curse of his own back at Harry, who jumped backwards around the corner and out of sight.

“Bellatrix, Rodolphus, with me. Jenkins, go check on Werthsley, and demonstrate to the Gryffindors that their supposed bravery means nothing,” Voldemort snapped, before brandishing his wand and disillusioning himself and the Lestranges. They cautiously crept round the corner, into a large wide main corridor, and saw nothing. After several terse seconds, Voldemort looked up. Harry, in his white robes and black mask, was levitating near the ceiling.

“Evertoxuro!” he shouted, sending a gout of dirty magical flame at Voldemort and his Death Eaters. They jumped backwards, hastily conjured shields blocking the worst of the spell, and replied with a vicious series of curses and conjured weapons, dropping their Disillusionment. Harry dropped down, firing off a blinding flash of light as he fell, and landed in a roll. He waved his wand, banishing a pair of conjured knives back at Voldemort, and slammed his palm into the ground. There was a rumbling boom, and the corridor shook wildly, sending Bellatrix and Rodolphus off balance, although Voldemort was entirely unaffected. The Dark Lord shone a wide beam of orange light from his wand, which burned Harry's robes where it touched. Harry cursed and parried the spell with a flick of his hand, before deftly Summoning a suit of armour from the end of the corridor, which clanked forward and grappled Rodolphus, bringing the man to the ground.

“Who are you?” Voldemort shouted, evoking an eerie sense of déjà vu for Harry; this was just like the Hogsmeade battle. Voldemort himself seemed to realise this, a frown forming on his face as he smashed Harry's decapitating curse aside, gouging out a portion of the stone wall next to him. Bellatrix laughed wildly and sent a whip of cursed fire at Harry, who grabbed it in a gloved hand and pulled hard,

dragging Bellatrix forward. Rodolphus, meanwhile, had crushed the head of the suit of armour with his silver hand, and was struggling to push the now inert mass of metal off his body.

“Crucio!” Bellatrix spat, as she was pulled off balance by the whip. The blood red curse travelled from the end of her wand and down the fiery rope, like a surge of electricity, before travelling up Harry’s arm. He felt a jolt of pain, akin to pins and needles all over his body, but his dead nerve endings, despite being bolstered by the magic of Hogwarts, ensured that he felt barely anything. With a grim smile behind his black, faceless mask, Harry let go of the whip, with Bellatrix pouring more energy into the Cruciatus, and gave a bark of cold laughter.

Bellatrix’s face grew fearful as, behind her, her husband got to his feet. Rodolphus brushed his wife aside and launched himself at Harry, the Killing Curse on his lips. Harry dodged the curse and slammed his fist into Rodolphus’ chest, while grabbing the man by the shoulder. With one deft movement he spun around and hurled Rodolphus into the end of the corridor behind him, shouting a pulverising curse as he did so. Rodolphus shot down the corridor, propelled by the magically assisted throw, and caught fire, screaming in agony as his bones were crushed by Harry’s powerful curse. He slammed into the far wall, before collapsing in a heap of charred robes and broken flesh. Harry turned back and ducked a Killing Curse from Voldemort, who was looking determined now that he knew his opponent was not to be underestimated. Bellatrix, her face contorted in fury, lashed out with a lance of silver energy, which slammed into Harry’s unprotected shoulder, and tore off a chunk of pale white flesh. Harry ignored the dark red wound, which didn’t bleed, and replied with a conjured railway spike, which shot at Bellatrix and narrowly missed her head.

Voldemort fired another Killing Curse at Harry, before looking over Harry’s shoulder and pausing for a second, motioning for Bellatrix to stop. Harry, slightly unnerved, dodged the curse and glanced behind him. Albus Dumbledore was standing there, looking at the corpse of Rodolphus Lestrange with a detached air.

“I see you’ve been busy,” he remarked nonchalantly, moving slightly to the side to avoid a Flaying curse from Bellatrix, who was twitching and spitting behind her mask. Harry took advantage of the confusion to launch himself at Voldemort, firing a Killing Curse as he did so. The Dark Lord narrowly dodged the curse, and Harry grabbed his shoulders, ramming his forehead into Voldemort’s nose. With a sharp popping noise Voldemort’s nose gave way, and Harry drove his fist into the Dark Lord’s stomach.

“INCENDIO!”

Voldemort’s robes, although charmed with protective spells, caught alight, and he fell backwards past an astonished Bellatrix, with Harry punching every inch he could reach. Dumbledore fired a coruscating bolt of purple energy at Bellatrix, who was forced to parry the unbelievably strong curse with both hands on her wand. She screeched in hate and fired off a trio of curses at Dumbledore, who absorbed them all into a palm-sized silver ball of energy, before launching it right back at her. She dodged it, and the pair of them began to trade spellfire at a blinding rate.

Harry slammed into the ground on top of Voldemort, and pounded his gloved hand into the Dark Lord’s face. Voldemort was howling in pain and rage, his robes blazing with magical fire. With a roar he wormed his legs under Harry and kicked hard, throwing the Chosen One to the side, although Harry was unaffected by the strong blow – pain was beyond him. The flames were causing his vision to blur and warp as his instincts told him to flee for his life, but his mental will and the magnitude of the fight forced down the Inferius-related fear.

Voldemort scrambled to his feet, firing a Killing Curse at Harry’s prone form and putting out the fires with his other hand. Harry rolled aside, dodging the curse, which burned a green glowing hole in the carpet. He replied in kind with a Sectumsempra, which Voldemort parried, sending the purple curse slicing through a window, which exploded outwards. The sounds of the outside battle flooded into the corridor – dragon’s screeches, Muggle gunfire, the roar of engines and the shouts of the giants. Harry took an electrical curse to the face, but managed to shrug it off easily and got up, the rope of blue energy

engulfing his mask. To his horror, the mask then cracked and exploded inwards under the force of the spell, embedding a couple of shards of black plastic into his face, and revealing his identity to Voldemort.

There was a pause in their duel – behind Voldemort, Bellatrix was currently grappling with a pair of golden chains which Dumbledore was magically manipulating, but she had bloodied the Headmaster with several cuts.

Voldemort looked at Harry, taking in his pale face, which wasn't bleeding from the pieces of mask embedded in it, and the shining eyes, which were glowing with power. He did the customary, almost comical in this instance, double take up to the scar, a look of surprise on his face.

“I saw you die,” he said, with a disbelieving tone; perhaps he suspected Polyjuice, or a Glamour. The pain in his nose was fogging the Dark Lord's thoughts – a bruise was also beginning to bloom on his left cheek.

“I'm pretty resilient, Riddle,” Harry replied, deftly plucking out the stray shards in his cheeks.

“Who are you, really?” Voldemort said, ignoring Dumbledore's grunt of pain as Bellatrix managed to send a portrait slamming into the back of his head, and then Bellatrix's howls as a jet of steam scalded her legs.

“I'm Harry Potter,” Harry said. “Boy-Who-Lived, Chosen One, time traveller, the Phoenix, you pick the name you want.” He smiled, an expression that looked out of place on his corpse-white, injured, face. “I'm probably the Boy-Who-Lived-Twice now, if that helps.”

Voldemort scowled, blood dripping from his cut nose, and swiftly raised his wand. Harry was quick, but Voldemort was quicker. A great gust of powerful wind whipped up in the confined corridor, slamming into Harry's unprotected back and sending him sprawling, before he was bodily lifted up by another charm and thrown into the wall,

breaking a portrait in two. Voldemort deftly flicked his wand, and Harry was sent flying through one of the broken windows, although he managed to grab onto the ledge with one hand, despite dropping his wand. Voldemort strode over to the window, and leant out. Harry was hanging, several floors up, from the ledge, broken glass embedded in his hand and wrist. Below him, far below him, were the grounds of Hogwarts – dark grass, almost black in this light. In the distance the lights of the battle for the grounds could be seen, next to the lake. Voldemort trained his wand carefully on Harry's face, with a murderous look in his eyes.

“Whoever you are, you'll die just the same. Avada Kedavra,” he said calmly, and Harry purposefully let go, the green Killing Curse shooting just past his ear as he toppled backwards like a ragdoll, white robes flapping madly in the wind. For several silent seconds he dropped, before finally hitting the hard ground with a sickening crunch. Voldemort smiled to himself, before turning back to the duel between Dumbledore and Bellatrix, idly fixing his injured nose while he did so. Potter had said something about time travel... assuming that was Potter, this news deserved a thorough contemplation once Hogwarts was his. Perhaps a variation on Inferius magic had brought him back...

The duel made for grim viewing for the Dark Lord. Bellatrix was magically blinded and limping from a powerful blow to the legs, and as Voldemort watched a devastating Bludgeoning curse, powerful enough to distort the air it travelled through, hit Bellatrix in the chest. There was a series of sharp cracks, and Voldemort's second-in-command collapsed backwards, blood bubbling and spluttering from the mouth-hole in her hideous silver mask. Dumbledore looked awe-inspiring, despite his eccentric robes – his whole frame crackled with invisible power, and his robes and beard were ruffled by an unknown wind – he had some injuries, but they had been already sealed up. Hogwarts herself was on the side of the Headmaster.

“Tom,” he said, nodding at Voldemort. “She was very well trained, commendably so.”

“Not enough to defeat the great Dumbledore, it seems,” Voldemort said, squeezing the newly-healed bridge of his nose. “And now here we are, as your castle burns.”

“Burns?” Dumbledore said. “I fear, Tom, that you underestimate the wizards and, I daresay, the Muggles, fighting here today. And I have to say, I think you may have underestimated dear Harry once more.”

“Jenkins and Werthsley are, as we speak, inside your precious Gryffindor tower, no doubt showing them what defiance will cost them in the new world order.” Voldemort spat with a grim smile. Dumbledore’s face dropped, and his frame visibly sagged as he realised his students might well be in serious trouble. His eyes flicked to the stained-glass window next to Voldemort, and he blinked. Voldemort noticed the glance, but continued.

“Your castle will burn, and as for Potter... that wasn’t him, I cut that boy down in Diagon Alley, regardless of what magic you had worked on him beforehand. I now cannot die by your hand, Dumbledore. I’ve won.”

“ Funny you should say Hogwarts is burning, Tom,” he said conversationally, and Voldemort scowled at the repeated use of the name. “As I would say that it is you who will be burning in the next few seconds.”

Voldemort looked confused for a split second, before following Dumbledore’s gaze to the window next to him. The Hungarian Horntail, an impossibly large black flying lizard with deep red eyes, covered in scratches and cuts from its scuffle with the giants, was hovering outside the window, kept aloft by great flaps of its wings. With a deep breath, it roared and breathed a gout of flame at the window. Voldemort hissed in shock and rage, before conjuring a flame-retarding spell and leaping forward, out of the window, to escape the conflagration that was about to engulf the narrow corridor. Dumbledore dived backwards and, with a shouted command, the walls of Hogwarts herself morphed and warped to seal the corridor, resulting in a very narrow oven-like space which was designed to trap Voldemort in with the dragon’s flames.

Unfortunately the Headmaster's plan failed – Voldemort leapt, encased in his blue protective shield, and crashed through the glass window. He was buffeted by the tongue of fire he had jumped straight into, and began to swiftly fall straight downwards to the black grassy ground below, past the fire and the hovering dragon and towards Harry's unmoving body. His bubble-like shield dissipated as he fell, and he screamed a levitation charm, managing to kill most of his momentum. He still landed hard, in a bone-crunching roll, but it wasn't fatal.

The Dark Lord groaned in pain, before passing out. Not even he could survive a head-first impact from that height without repercussions.

High above, the dragon snorted in satisfaction and flew back towards the Forest, over the charred, bullet-ridden corpses of the giants and the twisted, crushed wreckage of the Muggle vehicles – the fight in the grounds had been chaotic and ferocious, and only two jeeps had survived. Hagrid and Charlie were dragging the wounded to his cabin, aiming to save as many as they could.

Hogwarts, viewed from the grounds, was flashing and alive with bright multicoloured lights as fierce duels were fought in the corridors and classrooms – the most concentrated flashes were around the Common Rooms, where the Death Eaters aimed to break through to slaughter the huddled children within. Fires blazed from countless windows, lighting up the darkened grounds with sparks of light and colour. The Death Eaters had the upper hand numerically, but to any observer it was too close to call.

The Dark Lord, although currently lying unconscious next to the body of the Chosen One, had made his final move. And it was becoming depressingly clear that that move had every chance of smashing aside the people opposing it.

Chapter Thirty One – Time, Mr. Potter?

“We’ve got two ‘ere, Charlie!” Hagrid shouted, jogging heavily towards Gryffindor Tower, where two bodies were lying, unmoving, in the tall grass.

“You get them, Hagrid, I need to find out what’s happened to the Horntail!” Charlie yelled back, moving nimbly around a mangled Muggle APC and sprinting towards the Forest, where the dark shape of the Horntail had headed after torching one of Hogwarts’ floors.

Hagrid, garbed in his thick moleskin coat and splattered with the blood of wounded Muggles, ran up the hill with surprising speed, before reaching the first of the two bodies, a man garbed in pure white robes, face down. Hagrid rolled the body over, and jerked backwards in shock at what he saw.

A corpse white face... blinding green eyes, open and twitching... a thin scar, in a distinctive shape of a lightning bolt...

“Harry?” he said incredulously, leaning in closer, “is that you?”

Harry’s eyes rolled madly in his head, and he blinked rapidly. Hagrid threw aside the shock of the moment, feeling Harry’s sewed-up neck with uncharacteristic gentleness for a man with hands the size of dustbin lids.

“Broken neck,” he muttered, having tended to more than his fair share of animals. He glanced around before pulling out his pink frilly umbrella from his coat. “Here’s hopin’ this works, eh Harry?”

Harry’s eyes widened and he blinked mutely, as if to tell Hagrid he didn’t have much faith in him. With a barked charm, Hagrid waved the wand at Harry’s neck. There was a grating, crunching noise, and Harry’s body jerked violently as a blue current of energy ran over it. Harry opened his mouth and cracked his jaw, his shattered spine and broken neck healed by Hagrid’s none-too-delicate ministrations. If he hadn’t been a reanimated corpse, the trauma probably would have killed him.

“Ow.” He said simply – despite his deadened nervous system, that had hurt.

“Yeh lucky to be alive, Harry,” Hagrid said idly, checking the rest of his body, before pausing, his beetle-black eyes widening as he recalled just who he was speaking to. “Wait just a minute, how are yeh alive? And why are yeh dressed like that, and what’s tha’ stitching on your neck? Yeh vanished in Hogsmeade! We thought you were dead!”

Harry sat up, grabbing his wand, which had fallen a short distance away. “That’s a very long story, Hagrid. And one we don’t have time for.”

As he got to his feet the night sky was illuminated by a bright lance of red energy, which shot from a window near Ravenclaw tower.

“They’re wreckin’ the place,” Hagrid said sadly, distracted from his inquiries by the sight of the castle. “There’s another bloke over there, reckon we should look at him?”

Harry glanced over at the fallen man nearby, and immediately stiffened. “I wouldn’t, Hagrid, unless you want to help out Lord Voldemort.” Hagrid inhaled sharply at the name, backing away. Harry cautiously walked towards Voldemort, who began to stir as he approached. Quick as lighting, Harry raised his wand and fired off a Killing Curse at the prone and vulnerable Dark Lord, lightning up the darkened scene with a burst of green light.

Just as the curse was about to connect, Lord Voldemort’s robes turned into hard steel, absorbing the howling green bolt of magic in a green flash of flame. Voldemort screeched in pain from the now-molten metal touching his skin, rolling to one side weakly to dodge a follow-up curse from Harry. He scrabbled to his feet, transfiguring his robes back and repairing them, before firing off a Killing Curse at Hagrid, the first person he saw. Harry was forced to Banish the half-giant to one side, sending the huge man sprawling.

Voldemort ran his wand over his scorched flank, roughly healing the burned flesh there, before cracking his neck menacingly and stretching to pop his back.

“That hurt, Harry,” he said in a quiet voice, and Harry remained silent, his anger at the man before him growing.

“Didn’t hurt me very much. I’ve felt much worse. Dying, for example.”

“We have both felt the embrace of death – does that make us brothers, of a kind?” Voldemort replied in a whimsical tone, evidently stalling for time as he tried to inventory any possible injury he had sustained.

“I will never be like you,” Harry said vehemently, feeling a darkened mass of anger clouding his mind, fogging his vision. The Inferius rage inside him was threatening to spill over, especially seeing as Dumbledore, the man who had brought him back and inadvertently attempted to control his mind, was in such a high-stress situation. Harry had broken most of the magical link there, but enough remained for it to have an effect.

Hagrid looked between the two of them like a tennis match, remaining silent as neither man was acknowledging him.

“What are you?” Voldemort asked with genuine curiosity, raising his wand slowly to point at Harry’s chest. Behind him explosions began to rock Gryffindor Tower, and a ball of flame shot out of one of the Common Room windows, raining broken glass upon the grounds below.

Harry shrugged lamely, his wand also trained on Voldemort. “Inferius is probably the closest thing. Dumbledore was apparently preparing me a Horcrux, and had the tomes necessary to do this,” he waved at his corpse-like face, “when it came down to it.” His head twitched, as though he had a crick in his neck, and his eyes glowed momentarily as he tried to fight the sudden feelings whirling inside him – the fall had knocked something loose. He was similarly stalling for time,

desperately trying to clamp down on the dense mental fog of anger that was threatening to take control.

“ Horcrux?” Voldemort said dangerously, his eyes glinting underneath his silky hair. “I see the old man has gone deeper than he would probably like.”

Harry gave a bark of laughter, shaking his head. “And you had six, squirreled away. That fucking dragon was a nasty surprise, I’ll give you that. The stasis charm keeping that thing asleep was an impressive feat of magic.”

Voldemort’s eyes widened slightly, but he betrayed no other surprise. “So you have been busy,” he began to circle Harry slowly, like a predatory cat. “It changes nothing. I’ve killed you before, I can do it again.”

“Do you know how many times I’ve duelled you? I’ve pretty much lost count, to be honest,” Harry replied. “Maybe this time will be the charm, eh?” His head twitched again, imperceptibly, but he felt a wash of relief as the Inferius’ insane anger receded.

“Crucio!” Voldemort spat, and Harry stood there as the crackling pain curse hit him in the face. He grimaced in discomfort as his deadened nerves were stimulated, but otherwise didn’t flinch.

Voldemort looked mildly shocked, but simply spat and followed up with a Killing Curse. Harry moved to one side to avoid it, before his face hardened into a mask of hate.

“This isn’t going to end well for you, Tom. I’ll finish this, I just need more -”

“Time, Mr. Potter?” Voldemort finished in a mocking tone. “Every second that ticks away is another second your friends and fellow students bear the brunt of my Death Eaters’ assault. Think about that while you fight for your life here. Avada Kedavra!”

“Come on, kiddies,” the Inner Circle member called Jenkins cooed, creeping up the stairs to the male dormitories. The bodies of two seventh-years were currently being nailed to the wall by his partner, Werthsley, whom Harry had previously hit with a nasty electrical curse. The rest of the prefects had fled up the stairs, to the glee of the Death Eaters. They enjoyed a chase, before the kill.

“Hurry up, Werthsley,” he called back down the stairs, sweating slightly with anticipation. “Those two put up shit all of a fight, there might be some better ones up here.”

“Coming,” his partner said, finishing up his sick diorama by shooting large nails through the eyes of the dead prefects.

As he turned to walk up the stairs he heard a mighty roar, possibly of a dragon, coming from outside the portrait hole. The Death Eaters gave each other nervous looks, before turning back to walk up the stairs. As they set one foot on the staircase, the walls themselves morphed and moved to block off the dormitories with a solid wall of stone.

“What the fuck?” Jenkins said angrily, kicking the wall. Next to them, the girls’ dormitory steps also sealed off.

There was a heavy sigh from behind them, and the pair of them whirled around. Albus Dumbledore stood, bloodied and a bit ruffled, but otherwise in full fighting condition.

“It saddens me,” he said, deflecting a vicious burning curse from Jenkins with a wave of his hand, “to see my ex-students do this. Werthsley, you were a Hufflepuff. Where is your loyalty and sense of fair play now?”

His eyes flicked to the dead prefects on the wall. “Oh dear,” he said quietly, deflating slightly at the sight of his dead students. “Mr. Weasley was a very promising young man, in my opinion. A mite too pedantic sometimes, but his family loved him regardless.”

“He was a blood traitor freak,” Jenkins spat, throwing a Decapitation Curse at the Headmaster. Dumbledore blinked, and a fist-sized ball of marble appeared to absorb the curse, blowing apart and sending dusty fragments into the old man’s beard upon impact.

“I have been known to be a man for second chances,” he continued as though nothing had happened.

“A fucking idiot,” Werthsley cut in, raising his wand. Dumbledore sighed again, raising his wand.

“Very well. This is evidently a lost cause, gentlemen.” He paused for a long moment, before his hand blurred and whirled round in a semicircle, leaving a trail of fire behind akin to a sparkler on Guy Fawkes’ Night. There was a rush of wind and the two Inner Circle members were pitched sideways, next to the main Common Room window. Dumbledore roared a spell, lost over the howling wind, and a ball of white-hot fire was launched from the end of his wand, buckling the old man’s arm with its force. The two Death Eaters were absorbed by the fire, burnt to cinders in an instant and scattered out of the window in a billowing pillar of flame. Dumbledore watched as the flame slowly dissipated, before moving to the window, past the corpses of his students and the staircases, now unblocked. He looked out of the now-open hole in the wall, down into the grounds of his school.

They were littered with small fires where the Muggle vehicles had been burnt and broken, and he could see Charlie Weasley in the light from Hagrid’s cabin, frantically tending to the wounded. However that was not the most eye-catching thing. Below him Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort were duelling in the grounds, launching spells of earth-shaking power at one another and conjuring spellwork on a level Dumbledore had rarely seen. As he watched, Harry, a little figure in white, fired a rapid spray of golden arrowheads, which Voldemort sucked into a ball of turquoise energy and launched at the Boy-Who-Lived.

Dumbledore was disturbed from his reverie by a blast from Ravenclaw Tower, at the other end of the castle. The Death Eaters

were evidently breaking through into various areas of the castle – he needed to get some sort of report from the Ministry. He turned to the fireplace of the Common Room, whispering a complex arithmantic charm to bring down the wards blocking it, and grabbed a pinch of Floo Powder from the mantelpiece above the fireplace, trying to block out the sight of Percy Weasley’s crucified body.

“Ministry Operations Room!” he shouted, tossing the powder into the fire and sticking his head into the green flames. After a disorientating several seconds, his head popped up in a darkened room, populated by one lone figure – evidently the only man who had been on duty.

“Headmaster Dumbledore!” the Ministry worker said, nearly falling off of his chair. He was a small man, in his thirties, with mousy brown hair. He was sweating profusely and bits of paper were all over his desk – evidently he was under a lot of strain. Behind him the screens were flashing and constantly updating, most of them a mass of dots and casualty figures.

“Tell me what’s happening in Hogwarts and the Ministry,” Dumbledore replied curtly. The worker scanned the large scrying screens on the wall, talking as he did so.

“Hogwarts isn’t good, sir. The Muggles you have there have organised the best defence, down in the Great Hall. Lots of action was happening all over the place, but Snape, of all people, shepherded most of the Death Eaters down through the staircase and towards the Great Hall, where there was a defence rallied – it was a trap for the bastards, and it worked damn well. We owe him one.”

“Where is Severus?”

“He’s injured, I think. He killed a bunch of them as they went into the Great Hall, and then his dot stopped moving until a Muggle came from the Entrance Hall and dragged him away – the Muggle hid him, so I assume he was still alive.”

“Where are the other pockets of resistance?”

The Ministry Worker went pale. “Death Eaters are in the Ravenclaw Common Room – the dormitory walls have blocked off or something, the map isn’t clear. Flitwick is in there with the students, I think they’ll be fine, but some of them are dead...”

Dumbledore closed his eyes, nodding at the man to continue.

“There’s still some corridor fighting – McGonagall is moving around with some Aurors and clearing out a lot of odd Death Eaters – whoa, there she goes, two Death Eater dots just went dead. It’s still a two-to-one outnumbering – a fair few staff members have gone, and about half the Muggles, and Merlin knows how many Aurors. Sprout bought it, I think – she was protecting an Auror – the bastards killed the Auror, too. The suits of armour are pretty much gone now – they were prime targets when Death Eaters were moving around. It’s mainly just groups of Death Eaters trying to break and burn as much as possible.”

“What of the staircase?”

“The main one? The Death Eaters are all over it – one of the Inner Circle members rallied them and took it – Sinistra and those Aurors just weren’t enough – everyone else on our side is in the Great Hall. Oddest thing though, sir, it says here Harry Pot-”

“And the Ministry?” Dumbledore interrupted urgently, trying to change the subject.

“The Ministry? Well...”

The Ministry – DMLE department

“LUPESQUO!” bellowed Scrimgeour, launching a roaring Inferius backwards, a monsoon of iron blades ripping through its chest and arms. The DMLE department battle was at its zenith – the Dementors

had been driven off, flowing into the lift after poor Mad-Eye (probably dead now, Scrimgeour reasoned), the Veela were mostly lying dead and broken, and the main competition were now the brawling werewolves and the obscene numbers of Inferi. The Auror corps just didn't have the numbers – the Unspeakables were a very useful addition, as were the Muggles, but it just wasn't enough to stem the flood of Dark Creatures that had poured through the lift. Scrimgeour was standing over Shacklebolt's corpse – the man's head had been burnt to a crisp by a Veela.

“Crouch!” he shouted, backhanding an Inferius and deftly ducking a werewolf which sailed past him, snarling.

Barty Crouch was standing back to back with Sirius Black, of all people, trying to shield the Muggles from harm. The Muggles were now out of ammunition, and were knee-deep in Inferius corpses, fighting hand to hand with knives and fists. As Scrimgeour watched one of them got an Inferius in a headlock and brutally stabbed it through the eye with a combat knife.

“Rufus! We have to pull back!” Crouch shouted back, trying to curse a werewolf off of a screaming Ministry worker, whose arm was now savaged to pieces at the wrist. There were barely a dozen Aurors remaining, four of the six Unspeakables, half of the Muggles, and a smattering of Ministry workers. The attack had simply hit too hard – the enemy was too vicious, and numbered too many. They were literally at the back wall of the room now, the Lift was far away on the other side. Moody had vanished into it, pursued by the Dementors. There were still several dozen rabid Inferi, and a good eight werewolves battling the remaining Ministry personnel. The room stank of blood, sweat and vomit, with the floor slippery underfoot with gore on the shiny floorboards.

“Where to, Barty? We can't get through them!”

A drooling black werewolf appeared out of the knot of Inferi forcing their way forward over the corpses of friend and foe alike, and Scrimgeour's heart dropped. A distinctive grey streak of fur ran from the head to the tail of this particular werewolf, and blood was dripping

from its slavering jaws as it stepped over the savaged corpse of an Auror.

Greyback.

Scrimgeour raised his wand, looking braver than he felt. Greyback broke into a loping run, leaping high into the air with a howl. Scrimgeour shouted a curse, and boiling steam shot out of his wand, followed by a jolt of lightning and a spike of solid silver. Greyback was hit mid-air by all three curses, whimpering in pain as he was pitched aside with a silver dart in his flank. He shook off the injury, lunging again at Scrimgeour, who was knocked over, landing heavily on the floor. He grunted and blinked, seeing that he was face-to-face with Shacklebolt's steaming, ruined face. The stench of cooked flesh and death filled his nostrils, and he felt hot breath on the back of his neck as Greyback stood over the Minister.

There was what felt like a long pause, and Greyback's growl turned into a brutal roar as he prepared to deliver the killing bite.

"MINISTER!" Scrimgeour heard someone bellow, and there was a bang, a shriek like a firework over the din of the Inferi and the combatants, and Greyback was launched aside in a flash of silver light and a burly body. Croaker, the Unspeakable, had encased his body in blurry black armour with a complex charm, and was now wrestling with Greyback. Scrimgeour struggled to his feet, feeling dizzy from the stink of the battle, and watched as Croaker's arm was bitten by the raging werewolf.

The Unspeakable gritted his teeth in pain but the shining obsidian armour deflected the bite, and he grabbed Greyback's head with both hands.

"Argentium!" Croaker roared, and his hands flashed with bright white light and turned into silver, burning Greyback's face and causing wisps of smoke to rise from where the Unspeakable was pressing his hands. Scrimgeour watched for several more seconds, before he was knocked flat on his back by an earth-shaking boom from underground, as a jet of black smoke shot out of the Lift.

The charms on the Lift meant that the smoke could only have come from one place...

The Atrium.

Earlier, in the Atrium...

There was an innocuous ding in the essentially empty Atrium, which echoed softly before silence fell again. The lone werewolf and pair of Inferi who were waiting by the main desks, next to the bodies of the watchwizard, Auror and Ministry workers, looked at the lift as the golden grille began to open. There was a bang and two blurry figures were flung out, quickly coalescing into black cloaked shapes.

Dementors.

“Come on, laddie!” Moody shouted, firing a Patronus in the small Lift. Umbra, the enhanced Dementor, hissed and flew at him across the cramped elevator, slicing through the half-formed Patronus as it went. Moody laughed and raised his wand, shouting a spell to conjure a rough iron longsword. He deftly parried Umbra’s strikes, and backed out of the Lift, ducking another swing from the bone-blades as he discarded the conjured sword.

He heard a growling from behind him, and spun his magical eye around to see a werewolf, two Inferi and the two Dementors he had just cursed. The werewolf, a small grey beast, leapt at him with a howl, and Moody flung himself to the side. The Inferi, both essentially skeletons, scrambled over the watch-wizard desks and followed the werewolf, only to be set alight by Moody. The Dementors, disconcerted that they seemed to have little effect on the rampaging ex-Auror, swooped in overhead to hover next to their enhanced leader.

Moody beckoned to the werewolf, keeping one eye on the Dementors, who were hovering menacingly near the Lift. The werewolf turned to face Moody after its failed pounce, and bared its teeth in a growl. Moody laughed and flicked his wand deftly, firing a silver dart at the

werewolf, who screeched as it was hit in the eye. With another practised swish of Moody's wand the werewolf was set on fire, and the injured beast fled, howling and whimpering, to plunge its burnt and battered body into the Fountain of Magical Brethren in the centre of the Atrium. Moody looked at the Dementors, his scarred face illuminated by the nearby burning bodies of the Inferi, and smiled a grim smile.

Umbra paused for a moment, re-evaluating the grizzled Auror's skills. The brawl in the enclosed Lift had only lasted fifteen seconds as it descended, but Moody had held his own nicely, in spite of the despair the Dementors usually induced. The man had the constitution of a troll, and the single-minded determination of an Inferius. His only sign of discomfort was a slight twitching and a bit of a grimace – although it was hard to tell what was a grimace with a face like Moody's.

They stood facing each other, three against one, before Moody lunged and fired off a coruscating spike of fire at one of the remaining Dementors, its cloak catching alight where the spell touched. The Dementor was sent spiralling into the air, screaming and burning like a macabre firework, before the crackling fire spell consumed it entirely and left no remains. Umbra hissed and lunged forward, sending Moody darting backwards as he magically parried the bone-blades.

Umbra rained down blows on the ex-Auror for several seconds, slicing through magical shields and slowly driving Moody past the broken watch-wizard desks and towards the Fountain, where the werewolf was floating in the water, unconscious or worse. The other Dementor floated slowly behind, its rattling breath having little effect on Moody other than causing him to wince slightly.

“Evertoxuro!” Moody snapped as he barely ducked a particularly fast swing from the enhanced Dementor, sending a dirty jet of fire from his wand which licked at Umbra's robes, threatening to burn the Dementor alive. Umbra screeched at the heat and hovered backwards, allowing Moody to follow up with a trio of cutting curses, which flashed and screeched as they were deflected by Umbra's blades. Finally Moody fired a Patronus, which barely had time to form before it was sliced to pieces by Umbra.

Undeterred, Moody waved his wand and summoned an impressive amount of water from the Fountain, forming it into a ball of liquid the size of a chair. He shot the water at Umbra like a cannonball, alongside a series of devastating Bludgeoning and Ripping curses. The enhanced Dementor was hit by the water, which sent it flying backwards as the curses punched through its cloak and body in a spray of black tar-like gore. Moody pressed his advantage as the water seeped over the Ministry floor in a small wave, carrying a sopping wet Umbra with it. He brought his wand down like an executioner's axe, ripping a line out of the floorboards with a burst of invisible energy and cutting Umbra in two at the waist. There was a piercing scream as Umbra was cut in half, and the cloaked figure twitched several times, its four arms flailing in its death throes, before it was finally still. Black, thick blood liberally leaked from the folds of its robes, mixing viscously with the puddle of water it was lying in.

Moody grunted in satisfaction, before turning to face the last Dementor, which was, uncharacteristically for a mindless, faceless Dementor, looking hesitant. Finally it fled for the lift, its cloak billowing out behind it, and Moody levelled his wand and took careful aim.

“CONFRINGO!” he bellowed, sending a bright jagged spell flying across the Atrium, slamming into the back of the Dementor with pinpoint accuracy as it entered the Lift. There was a muffled rush of air as the spell sunk into the Dementor's back, before the beast exploded in a deafening bang, sending black oily smoke flying everywhere, including up the Lift shaft.

Moody fell to one knee, gasping for air, as the feeling of oppressive despair finally lifted from his mind – it had taken every ounce of his efforts to simply not pass out while fighting the Dementors. He wheezed as the adrenaline that had kept him going began to fade, before he shuddered, blackness eating away at his vision. With no Pepper-Up potions or Stimulating Solutions, he was unable to prevent himself slipping into unconsciousness – he wasn't as young as he was, and the ex-Auror was suffering from severe magical exhaustion. Moody pitched forward onto the damp floorboards, near Umbra's corpse, shaking slightly as he finally allowed himself the liberty of

passing out. His contribution to the fate of the Wizarding World was over.

“Lumos Maxima!” Harry shouted, launching a bright white flare from the end of his wand, illuminating the scarred grounds as bright as day as the flare rocketed towards Voldemort. The Dark Lord hissed as he was blinded by the glare, and brought up a gleaming transparent green shield, akin to a dark green sheet of glass, to absorb the light as well as Harry’s follow-up curses. Harry then whipped his wand around, levitating the crushed and burning remains of a nearby Muggle Jeep, before flinging the whole mess at Voldemort. Voldemort ran forwards and thrust out his open hand, catching the Jeep with an outstretched palm and hurling it straight back at Harry with a shouted spell.

Harry’s eyes widened in shock as the mass of metal flew right at him, and he barely got up a silvery shield in time. The Jeep, or what was left of it after a Giant had stepped on it, slammed into the shield and dissipated it with a pop, crushing Harry and sending him flying backwards as the metal missile tore a great furrow in the ground and pinned him beneath it. Voldemort stood for a second in quiet surprise, unwilling to believe the Boy Who Lived was so easily dispatched.

Sure enough, the burning hunk of metal began to glow bright red before exploding outwards with great force - completely consumed by blue magical fire until nothing remained. Harry slowly got to his feet at the end of the freshly-gouged trench, his left arm twisted at an unnatural angle below the elbow and his face badly burned. His robes were splattered with congealed blood and charred in several places, and his normally-pale face was an angry red and black where the metal had burned clean through. He sidestepped a quick Killing Curse from Voldemort, and magically repaired his shattered left elbow, showing no discomfort from his hideous injuries. He began to nonchalantly dust himself down as Voldemort stared, his face contorting with rage.

Voldemort growled with anger, before drawing his wand in front of him in a horizontal line, creating a red glowing line of energy in front of him. With a sound like a handclap, the line fizzled loudly and shot

forwards as a long strip of 2D dark purple energy, impossibly thin and horizontal, like a floating red carpet from Muggle film awards. Harry dived backwards to dodge the purple line, narrowly avoiding it. The line managed to nick his burned cheek, causing the charred and blackened skin to crack horribly and seep thick congealed blood. Harry winced at the uncomfortable feeling of splitting skin, before he directed his wand at his face as he lay on his back in the dirt. With a glowing golden light, his cheek scabbed over immediately and fresh new skin was produced – completely pale like the rest of his body, but no longer hideously scarred. The silver stitching around his neck glowed as the spell washed over his head.

Voldemort followed up his esoteric ribbon-like curse with a hurled ball of green fire, with the Dark Lord advancing on Harry as the Boy Who Lived scrambled to his feet. The green fire missed, sailing over Harry's head and falling harmlessly into the Lake, which glittered nearby as the merfolk swarmed just under the surface. Harry countered with a hail of golden arrowheads which rattled from the end of his wand like a Muggle machine gun – Voldemort whipped his wand over the palm of his hand and absorbed the arrowheads into a hand-held turquoise ball of crackling energy, which he then shot at the Chosen One. Harry himself whispered a spell to cause a thin foot-long bar of green light to appear from the end of his wand, with a deft flick he wacked the turquoise ball back at Voldemort using the green sword-like protrusion, and followed the riposte up with a conjured monsoon of steel daggers.

Voldemort deftly dodged the turquoise ball of energy and whipped his wand around to conjure a howling maelstrom of wind, which plucked Harry's knives out of the air and whirled them around the Dark Lord, who then shot them right back at the Boy Who Lived. With one wave of Harry's wand the knives turned into a puff of smoke, which he then directed to coalesce into a pillar of black filthy fog and tried to use it to throttle Voldemort. The Dark Lord choked as the surprise assault got under his defences, but one stamp of his foot saw the black smoky magical appendage vanish.

"Is this all you've got, Harry?" he said mockingly, tossing another Muggle Jeep at Harry, who magically grabbed the mangled vehicle and sent it sailing into the Lake. Harry roared in anger, his eyes

glowing a brilliant green as small rocks and bits of grass began to fly around his body, stirred by an invisible wind which played with his dirtied white robes. Voldemort laughed and fired off a Killing Curse, which Harry levitated a clump of soil clean out of the ground to absorb. Hagrid, by this point, was cowering nearby, unable to run for fear of attracting Voldemort's ire, but apparently unable to help.

"Just think, right now all your little Gryffindor friends are probably being slaughtered like animals," Voldemort goaded further, parrying a silver bolt of light from Harry's wand. "That fireball was probably my Inner Circle cooking the Prefects alive..."

Harry roared again, an incoherent howl of anger at the man who had torn his life apart again and again. First Voldemort had killed his parents, then his mentor Dumbledore, then all his friends and everyone he had ever loved, and now even after Harry had time travelled he was trying to do it all again. The invisible wind picked up, ruffling Harry's hair and revealing his scar, which was glowing a deep red against his pale forehead. Harry lashed forward with a Sectumsempra, just as Voldemort fired off a Killing Curse. The two spells, one purple, one green, connected in mid-air.

There was a golden flash of light, and a thick rope of pure fiery gold connected their wands, with smaller offshoots of gold energy firing into the night sky. There was a burst of brilliant Phoenix song, before Voldemort closed his eyes and thrust his wand forward, sending the thick beads of energy which had just begun to form on the wand-connection shooting towards Harry's wand. Just as the familiar dome of light began to weave its way around them, the golden beads slammed into Harry's wand, who had not anticipated the sudden assault through the Priori Incantatem.

There was a sound like screaming children and shattering glass, and the golden light vanished instantly, along with the haunting Phoenix song. Harry was blown backwards into the air as his robes caught alight, sending him flying to splash, back first, into Hogwarts' Lake. Voldemort laughed, standing on what was now scorched and blackened earth, the grass having been burnt away by their furious

fighting. He strode towards the lake, as Harry's limp body bobbed up and down in the water, and raised his wand.

"That old fool Dumbledore will be next... Avada-"

He was cut off by a shout from Hagrid, who had been watching the whole thing. The impossibly large half-giant charged Voldemort from behind in a surprisingly fast bull-rush, tackling the Dark Lord from behind and sending Voldemort sprawling, his shoulder cracking as it was dislocated. Hagrid raised a meaty fist, bringing it down into the Dark Lord's gut, causing thick blood to spray from Voldemort's mouth. As Hagrid, yelling incoherently in rage, brought his fist down again, it slammed into a blue crackling shield, which he failed to shatter. Voldemort coughed blood again, his dirtied hair now matted with it, and hissed a curse. Hagrid's body began to hiss and smoke, and he howled in pain as Voldemort lashed out weakly with a magically-enhanced kick, sending the half-giant stumbling. Voldemort twitched, in extreme pain from Hagrid's devastating tackle, and raised his only good arm, firing off a wandless green jagged curse which slammed into Hagrid's face. The half-giant's resilience to magic absorbed the worst of the Decapitating curse, but he was still sent into painful unconsciousness, bleeding from the ears – Lord Voldemort's spells were too powerful to fully resist.

Voldemort gasped in pain, his shoulder badly out of joint and his black robes beginning to stain with red blooms where his broken ribs had pierced his skin. Nearby Harry floated, face down, still smoking from the magical backlash. For the second time that evening, cursing the half-giant who had interrupted his victory, Lord Voldemort slipped into unconsciousness.

"Do you think they'll get through?" Neville said, shaking like a leaf as he huddled in his four-poster. Hermione gave him a reassuring pat on the arm while Ron sat, staring at the door to the boy's dormitory. The whole Gryffindor third year were sat in the boy's dormitory as the battle for Hogwarts raged beneath them. They had tried to look out of the windows, but the glass panes had sealed shut with solid stone – Dumbledore had briefed them that something like that might happen.

A seventh year, a tall blonde boy with a kind smile, was sitting near the door, wand in hand.

“I miss Harry,” Ron whispered to Hermione, who hugged him sadly. They both missed their best friend terribly – he had been taken in the destruction of Hogsmeade, and everyone assumed he was dead. They had cried for nights, staying up late in the Common Room with Hedwig and Crookshanks, and had been given some kindly words by Professor Dumbledore, who had assured them that they would see Harry again.

Hollow words now, really, when the enemy was at the gates.

As the third years sat, barely whispering to each other, one of the windows unsealed itself to let some air into the stuffy dormitory. Ron and Hermione slowly walked over to it to gaze out at the grounds – they gasped at what they saw. Small fires everywhere, with burning hunks of metal Hermione whispered were Muggle military jeeps. The ground was torn up and scorched, and in the Lake a small man, garbed in white, was floating, motionless. As they watched the Merpeople swarmed away from the man, as though they were terrified.

“I wonder who he is,” Hermione said quietly, and Ron shrugged. “Is he one of ours or one of... them?”

As they watched, a great explosion blew out the windows in Ravenclaw Tower, opposite them, and the third-years shrieked with fright. The window ground with stone against stone, and Ron and Hermione ducked backwards as it resealed itself, trapping the third-years in their room once more.

“Come on mate. Get to your bloody feet, we aren’t done yet.”

Harry groaned as a lance of pain shot into his brain – he hadn’t felt pain since that moment in the Alley where everything had changed... but this wasn’t physical pain, per se – it was more like a blinding

headache which was stabbing behind his eyes. He opened them, seeing only a murky green which seemed oddly familiar.

Fourth year... the Second Task...

Harry opened his mouth and a solitary bubble of air escaped his otherwise empty lungs, spiralling lazily past his vision. He was in the Lake!

He floundered and splashed, righting himself and brushing his sodden hair out of his eyes as he broke the surface. He blinked stupidly and looked to his right, seeing an adult Ron Weasley sitting on the surface of the water, looking sadly at him.

“Seeing things again, mate?”

“What happened, Ron?”

“Bugger if I know, looks like Voldemort nailed you through the Priori. I only know what you know.”

Harry went under as he forgot to tread water, and swiftly resurfaced, feeling slightly embarrassed despite knowing Ron was a figment of his imagination.

“Where are the merpeople?”

“Come on, don’t be thick. They don’t exactly want to hang around you,” Ron said with a crooked smile, gesturing at Harry’s pale face. Harry nodded in realisation, before turning back and swimmingly clumsily to the pebbly shore, and wading ungracefully out of the water when he was close enough. He waved his hand towards the lake and wandlessly summoned his wand, before casting a hasty but thorough drying spell and cleaning charm on his sodden robes. He looked back at the Lake, but Ron was gone. He shook his head, like a dog trying to get water out of its ears, and tried to clear the fog of rage he had felt when duelling Voldemort.

He heard a wheezing from behind him, and whirled round, wand raised. Voldemort lay near the Lake, twitching and spluttering, while Hagrid's inert, hopefully unconscious, body lay next to him. Harry strode over to Voldemort, an invisible wind whipping up as his anger at the helpless Dark Wizard grew. His green eyes began to glow, and his scar pulsed a livid red against the pale white of his face as Harry stood over the Dark Lord, wand pointed at the man's head.

"Going... going to kill me, Harry?" Voldemort said, staring at Harry's wand. The front of his robes were stained with blood, and his face and chin were covered in gore. His wand arm lay by his side, bent at an unnatural angle.

Harry nodded grimly, his eyes glowing brighter until his face was shining a dim green as the magical energy flowed through his animated corpse of a body. Voldemort coughed up blood, laughing weakly.

"Killing a disabled opponent, Harry, very Gryffindor of you."

A part of Harry's mind, the smart part, screamed that Voldemort was trying to play to his compassion, no matter how shrivelled that part of him was now. Harry twitched slightly, the end of his wand shaking, and Voldemort laughed again, splattering the hem of Harry's white robes with red spots.

"Pathetic. Just like your father. He tried to beg for his life..."

Harry growled, feeling the black cloud of anger descending over his vision, and struggled to form the two syllables which would end Voldemort's twisted excuse for a life. Finally he roared, the insane black rage gripping his mind and tossed his wand aside before grabbing a surprised Voldemort by the lapels. Harry lifted up the crippled Dark Lord and tried to slam him into the floor, but Voldemort was too quick despite his injuries. With a flick of his uninjured arm the Dark Lord's wand flew into his hand.

"Imperio!" he spat, coughing blood. Harry felt a blinding light behind his eyes and a piercing pain in his mind – something unfamiliar to him

in his deadened body. Voldemort hissed, struggling to maintain the Imperius curse in the face of Harry's stubborn resistance.

"Legilimens!" He said finally, and a bright purple flash burst over Harry's eyes, as Voldemort screeched in pain. The magical backlash from Harry's insane anger sent the Dark Lord's Legilimency probe awry, although Harry was conscious of several memories and basic surface thoughts being skimmed off – such as knowledge of his time travelling and knowledge of Dumbledore resurrecting his decapitated corpse. Voldemort writhed and screamed, before finally his Imperius curse shattered along with the painful Legilimency link. Harry roared as the black fog reaffirmed its grip on his mind, still holding Voldemort in the air by the front of his bloodied black robes.

Harry looked at Voldemort with glowing green eyes, as he growled under his breath. After a moment of silence he roared and then threw him, sending the Dark Lord sailing through the air to land on his injured shoulder with a hiss of pain. Not finished, Harry grabbed his wand, levitating Voldemort's body into the air and slamming it into the ground, four times in all, and then Summoned the Dark Lord. As Voldemort's body flew towards him he clasped both fists together and brought them around in a double-handed punch, which slammed into Voldemort's nose, breaking it for the second time that evening. Voldemort shrieked in pain and fell to the ground hard.

Harry raised a fist and brought it down on the Dark Lord's nose, again and again until he felt the nose give way entirely to soft bloody flesh. Finally, as he brought his fist down again, he felt a buzzing blur of magic form under his hand, and Harry was launched backwards in a display of bright blue defensive magic from the Dark Lord.

Voldemort spluttered and moaned in pain, an uncharacteristic display of weakness from the Dark Lord. He rolled over weakly, managing to finally grab his wand with his working, albeit heavily bruised, arm. With a wave he managed to fix his ruined nose, popping and wrenching the broken cartilage back into place as Voldemort moaned in pain at the spell's none-to-gentle movements of his pulped flesh. Gasping, as Harry struggled to get to his feet, Voldemort waved his wand at his shoulder, sending it crunching back into place. Harry managed to get up as Voldemort attempted, still blinded by blood, to

fix his ribs, one hand clutching his head as stabbing pains from the Legilimency probe pounded away at his brain.

“No,” Harry said scrabbling for his own wand. He found it and pointed it at Voldemort, firing off a Killing Curse with a shouted incantation. Voldemort summoned the nearest thing to block it – Hagrid’s body.

“NO!” Harry shouted, managing to Banish the half giant just in time, but felt a spike of frustration as his curse missed Voldemort. Voldemort scrabbled backwards, breathing heavily and wincing in pain as his ribs ripped further through his paper-thin flesh, before managing to send them shooting back into his body. Harry whipped his wand back and forth, summoning a vicious wind which lifted Voldemort’s body into the air and sent it flying towards the Castle, up the slope towards the main Entrance doors. He shouted in incoherent anger as Voldemort managed to get up after he was sent sprawling on the gravelled path to the castle, and he gave chase as the Dark Lord scrambled towards the closed doors of Hogwarts Castle, dripping blood onto the stony path as he went, managing to recover his wits after the Legilimency probe had overwhelmed him with Harry’s black anger.

Voldemort, for the first time in his life, was running away. Harry shook his head, clearing the rage that had claimed him as he pursued the most wanted man in Britain. Voldemort running away gave him no small satisfaction, he had to admit.

“COME BACK!” he roared, giving chase. “COME BACK, YOU COWARD!”

Voldemort paused for a moment, nearly at the castle steps. He turned to look at Harry, a black figure framed by the mighty doors of Hogwarts Castle. Blood was dripping silently from his various cuts and bruises, despite the majority of his wounds having closed up by now. Harry gripped his wand tightly in his fist, standing resolutely facing the man who had once murdered everyone he had ever loved without a care. Inside, he was furious at himself for giving into the

Inferius' rage, furious that he had missed his opportunity to deliver the killing blow.

“Little Harry Potter...” Voldemort said dangerously, still wincing slightly from his Legilimency backlash, and breathing heavily, obviously still in pain. “You’ve been fighting this war for longer than even I realised. The Chosen One, an undead time traveller? “

Harry gave him a hard stare, raising his wand to point it at Voldemort.

“My only question would be...” Voldemort began, coughing slightly, “Can you save everyone, like you so obviously want to do? I saw it, burned into the forefront of your mind, even in the midst of that rage. You want to be the Chosen One who does the saving; who makes sure the world lives on to fight another day. You want to be the Phoenix, the avenging angel who rescues the huddled, impure masses. You know what I have to say to that?”

Harry remained silent, not trusting himself to speak.

“Two words.” He slowly raised his wand, pointing it seemingly in a random direction behind him above his head, as he gathered his power about himself in an invisible rush.

“QUASSUM EXTRICUS!”

Harry had a scant second to process the words of the high-level pulverisation curse, developed for mining and building projects, before an orange and green ball of crackling magic launched out of the end of Voldemort's wand, causing the Dark Lord's arm to buckle. The curse flew upwards, towards a target which caused Harry's stomach to sink and his mind to fly into overdrive. It was a target which had no chance against such a potent curse – it was rarely used in duels simply because it was hard to survive in any sort of close quarters, being comparable to Muggle TNT in terms of subtlety and power.

Voldemort's wand had been pointing at Gryffindor Tower. With a bark of dark laughter at Harry's expression the Dark Lord turned and

walked the short distance towards the castle doors, showing a supreme lack of empathy for the children ensconced in Gryffindor Tower.

Time seemed to slow for Harry. He could only think of precisely one option under such pressure, which probably wouldn't work, and would probably kill even him in his undead body. He closed his eyes, drew in his power, and inhaled. As his skin ignited in a blinding flash of magical energy, he turned sharply on his heel and attempted Disapparition, yelling in fury and anger as he punched clean through the Hogwarts Anti-Apparition wards, which had been strained by the amount of energy that had been thrown around inside the castle. With a crack, Harry Potter disappeared.

Whirling bright colours. Burning heat. Chilling cold. Roaring wind in his ears. Harry yelled aloud as his corpse body was subjected to a plethora of feelings he had not felt since his untimely decapitation. The Hogwarts wards plucked and pulled his body, which was engulfed in the blazing fires of his uncontrolled magic. It was like pushing a pin through an elastic band – eventually it gave and he was shot straight through, squeezed like a tube of toothpaste and finally appeared on top of Gryffindor Tower, on the tiled roof of the turret overlooking the Castle. The crackling pulverisation curse was shooting rapidly towards him, lighting up walls with an eerie glow as it past. Below him Hogwarts herself was alive with noise and lights; several windows were broken, and smoke was gushing forth from a good few of them.

Harry stood on the tiles, after scrabbling to his feet, a bright beacon of orange burning light against the dark rooftop. With barely a second thought, he jumped off of the roof straight towards the curse, his wand whipping around in a blurred series of motions. The curse shot straight for his chest as he bellowed a powerful shielding charm, pouring everything he had into the defensive nexus of energy. A bright sapphire veil of sparkling light appeared between his falling, burning body and the pulverisation curse, which hit a fraction of a second later.

For one second there was absolutely no sound – even the sound of his own breathing cut out in Harry’s ears. Then, there was only noise. He was blasted backwards into the harsh stone wall of Gryffindor Tower as the pulverisation curse ground into his shield mercilessly, pushing relentlessly into his stomach and trying to drill him into the wall in an effort to reach it’s target. Harry sobbed and screamed in shock and unexpected pain as his body was overloaded with magical energies, setting his deadened nerves on fire with pain. Finally the wall behind him groaned, cracked, and gave way entirely. The magical fire, the visual representation of his magical energies being forced to the limit, flared brightly before fading as quickly as it had appeared.

There was a glaring flash of sapphire light as Harry was shot clean through the wall into the sealed-up dormitory inside, dust and rock filling the enclosed space. The pulverisation curse hit the ruined wall seconds after, punching through the sapphire veil of power Harry had conjured, but the curse’s energy was largely spent and it fizzled and died against Hogwarts’ iron-hard wards.

Harry barely registered the shocked looks of a room full of third year students and the screeches of surprised pets as he writhed in agony on the ground, green crackling arcs of magic sparking over his white-robed body. Dust hung in the air for several seconds before one boy, an older seventh year, cleared the thick smoky dust with a wave of his wand. The dormitory wall was completely shattered, and Harry was lying amidst the remains of a four-poster bed, with the ruined hangings smouldering gently. His chest was oddly concave, his ribs smashed in from the pulverisation spell. He was, however, conscious, and the pain slowly receded as his body flushed out the magical energies that had temporarily revitalised his deadened nervous system. His robes and the immediate area around him was splattered with claggy, congealed blood and splinters of bones, most likely ribs.

“H...Harry?” he heard a high pitched voice squeak. With a small groan he turned his head, with effort and wincing at the grating sound that accompanied it, and looked across the windowless dormitory to see a small huddle of students, but two in particular.

He tried to hide his shock when he saw who had spoken. Ron and Hermione, naught but terrified children were staring at him in shock, their eyes transfixed on his pale forehead, where his lightning-bolt scar stood out against his pasty flesh.

In Hogwarts' Entrance Hall, Albus Dumbledore strode down the main steps, blasting two foolish Death Eaters aside as he did so, pinning the masked men to a nearby wall with a nonchalant flick of his wand. With a regretful sigh he noticed the corpses of several Muggles and a pair of seventh year students, as well as the unconscious body of Severus Snape, who was hidden clumsily in a broom cupboard, one booted foot poking out. The Hall was pitted with blackened marks from errant spells and several portraits were smouldering and burning in scorched frames, their inhabitants long gone. As Dumbledore, acutely aware of the screams and shouts coming from the Great Hall, where the apex of the battle was raging, reached the foot of the stairs, the great doors of Hogwarts juddered in their frames.

Then, they slowly creaked open.

Lord Voldemort stood, staring at Albus Dumbledore with undisguised hatred. His once-fine robes were burnt and tattered, showing pale flesh beneath in some areas. His face was bruised and bloodied, with his hair matted and lank, yet his eyes still shone with dark power. His yew wand, containing the core of Dumbledore's loyal companion, was pointed directly at the Headmaster's chest, as they faced each other across the hall. Behind Voldemort the darkling grounds were illuminated with spots of light from burning Muggle vehicles, and the roars of the Horntail could be heard faintly in the distance, over the sounds of the battle in the Great Hall and the rest of the castle.

"Tom," Dumbledore said gravely, his eyes absent of their usual twinkle and his jovial manner completely undetectable. He felt a flash of worry – what had happened to Harry?

"Headmaster," Voldemort said with mock respect, as Dumbledore drew his wand out of his robes. "Recovered from your humiliating defeat in the Alley?"

“I fear, Tom, that this particular duel will be a mite different from our previous encounter,” Dumbledore replied.

“So, Dumbledore,” Voldemort continued, ignoring Dumbledore’s reply. “How does it feel, performing the darkest of the arts? Plumbing the very depths of magic in a frantic effort to save the impure masses you so strive to protect? How does it feel, having brought Harry Potter kicking and screaming back into this world, only to have me vanquish him once more?”

Dumbledore’s face set into a mask of cold determination, as his robes billowed around him.

“As I have said before to you, Tom, my feelings and personal views on matters such as this are irrelevant. We must choose between what is right and what is easy.”

Voldemort scoffed, his wand still trained on Dumbledore. Dumbledore slowly raised his wand, and stared Voldemort in the eye, power pooling into the end of his wand as it suddenly lit up with a bright mauve spell, the first shot in their imminent duel.

“I chose what was right.”

Chapter 32 – Saving Us

The Ministry

“Its over.” Scrimgeour said, struggling to stand due to utter exhaustion. The last of the Inferi, the last of the attack force that had assaulted the Ministry, had finally fallen. The DMLE hall was now a mass of corpses, blood and smouldering floorboards. The survivors, just over a dozen men and women, were standing near him, most of them silent in shock. Crouch, Black, some Muggles, Croaker and one fellow Unspeakable and a handful of Aurors were the only ones to have made it. No, wait... he looked again, seeing some people, including the Weasley parents, Remus Lupin and others he didn't know, huddled in a group. Dumbledore's lot. They looked bad, seriously shaken or crying. Not soldiers, not by a long way.

“We couldn't even save the workers who wanted to fight for us,” Black said quietly, standing over the body of a Veela, an air purification charm hovering around his head, visible as green sparkles. Crouch stood next to him, similarly quiet. It was a testament to the trauma of the battle that Crouch was able to stand next to someone he knew only as a mass-murderer and not take any action. Crouch was bleeding from a vicious cut on his cheek, and he was favouring his right leg over his bruised left.

“What of... what of Hogwarts?” Croaker asked, trying not to look at the corpses of his fellow Unspeakables, who were scattered around.

“Radios won't work in here,” one of the Muggles remarked, more collected than the Wizards – despite his professional calm, his hands were shaking. “We can't contact our mates up in Scotland.”

Scrimgeour said nothing for a moment, feeling several pairs of eyes on him. “We... we should get to the Operations Room,” he said finally. “Someone needs to go down to the Department of Mysteries to tell the Unspeakables there its all clear.”

“Sir,” one of the Aurors said, also pointedly not looking at the floor, with the same green sparkles round his head as Sirius had, “What

should we do about..." he motioned wordlessly to the bodies surrounding the group.

"Just leave them," he said after a long pause. "We have to see what has happened at Hogwarts – they might have fared worse than we did..." he left the consequences of this unsaid. "Dawkins," he gestured at an Auror who was white as a sheet, but trying desperately to look collected, "try to contact our boys on the outside, the ones who were on assignment. We might get lucky and have some reinforcements." He also waved towards Dumbledore's people, his Order. "Arthur... take your wife and go check on the group in the Department of Mysteries." The Weasleys had seen enough – it was a miracle they had even survived. They shouldn't have had to have seen this.

Having given his orders, he remained standing still in silence. The grizzled lion-like Minister couldn't tear his eyes away from the corpses of his fallen allies – Aurors, Muggles and others, all slowly turning white and cold. Dead, like Potter...

"Sir?" an Auror questioned quietly, ashen-faced and relying on his superior for support.

With a tired, grim sigh, Scrimgeour shook himself slightly and made the motion for the group of survivors to move into the Lift. Their night was not over.

"DUCK!" a Muggle soldier shouted, tackling one of the Aurors to the ground and sending them both crashing behind the hastily-erected barricades in the Great Hall as a Killing Curse shot overhead.

The rag-tag group that had made it into the Hall alive, thanks to Snape, were now putting up a ferocious resistance. The large tables and benches that made up the furniture in the Hall were now magically-strengthened barricades, a pair of ramshackle picket lines at opposite ends of the hall. Spellfire and Muggle gunfire was being traded at a furious, blinding rate. Corpses, blackened spellmarks and discarded pieces of the animated suits of armour littered the no-

man's-land in between the two groups of fighters, and the grand tapestries that usually lined the walls were now burning fiercely, sending thick black smoke up to obscure the enchanted ceiling.

The animated ceiling, often a source of wonderment to visitors, teachers and students alike, was a roiling mass of dark purple clouds and forks of lightning, reflecting the worsening weather conditions outside the hall.

The Aurors were doing the majority of the spell-flinging, with the remaining teachers fortifying the barricades as best they could. The Heads of Houses were absent – Snape was unconscious, Flitwick was battling for the protection of his Ravenclaw students, Sprout was allegedly dead and McGonagall was leading the remaining Order and Auror groups through the castle in a desperate attempt to scour the Death Eater invaders from the halls of Hogwarts.

Despite this deadlock, the Death Eaters had the upper hand. Several of the silver-masked Inner Circle members were directing devastating volumes of spellfire, and they simply had the numbers to make their attack prevail. The conflict was currently focused around shattering the opponents' defences – both physical and magical shielding was being erected and blasted apart with every passing second.

The Great Hall may have been the point of the battle where there were the largest numbers of combatants, be they terrified seventh-year students or hardened Death Eaters, but the Entrance Hall was where the most magically potent confrontation was about to occur. Lord Voldemort, ex-Head Boy of the very institution he was hoping to destroy, was facing Albus Dumbledore, greatest Headmaster Hogwarts had ever known and one of the strongest wizards on the planet.

Despite this, the key figure in the whole conflict was still lying in Gryffindor Tower...

Dumbledore slowly raised his wand, and stared Voldemort in the eye, power pooling into the end of his wand as it suddenly lit up with a bright mauve spell, the first shot in their imminent duel.

“I chose what was right.”

There was a roar of deafening sound as two jets of lightning – one purple, one black - shot out of each of the duellists’ wands, meeting in the middle in a thick crackling arc of electricity. Dumbledore grunted as he shoved his wand forward, the electricity skewing wildly and smashing into the floor with a static hiss. As soon as the energy had dissipated, Dumbledore transfigured several nearby rocks into vicious attack dogs, before banishing them at Voldemort.

The Dark Lord merely smirked, slicing his wand down with a shouted incantation. A jet of powerful wind shot forward, battering the dogs aside, before he retaliated with a spray of potent acid. Dumbledore didn’t blink, transfiguring the acid into harmless water before it hit him, and slammed his foot into the tiled floor. Great spikes of stone shot out from where his foot touched the ground, running in a straight line towards Voldemort, who hissed and darted to one side. Dumbledore followed this up with a trio of powerful Bludgeoning hexes, the spells distorting the air as they shot towards Voldemort. The Dark Lord parried them aside, the spells fizzling out in a shower of golden sparks, before he fired a Killing Curse straight back at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore twirled aside, gracefully dodging the curse, and conjured up a small mirror which absorbed the next five vicious curses from Voldemort. With a tap, the mirror broke, and vanished along with the trapped spells.

“Arcurio!” Dumbledore boomed, firing off a lash of icy water, which split into twelve separate “tails”, each one aiming to ensnare Voldemort. The Dark Lord easily conjured a ball of hellish Fiendfyre, but the icy whip grabbed the ball of fire and crushed it into nothing with a flick of Dumbledore’s wand. With his free hand Dumbledore deftly transfigured several rocks and bits of debris scattered around the Entrance Hall into chains and heavy weights, sending them flying at the Dark Lord, who was struggling with the watery whip.

“Extressus!” Dumbledore shouted with a hard jerk on his wand, which still had the whip protruding from the end. Voldemort was

tugged nearly off of his feet, but with a snarl he began to, impossibly, draw blobs of shadow from around the Hall to gather at his feet. With a wordless cry he snapped the watery whip with his hand and burst into flame, dark fire engulfing his robed and bloodied form as he stared down Dumbledore with crimson eyes.

“This ends now!” he spat, raising his yew wand. Dumbledore’s face hardened into a grim mask as he also raised his wand. Voldemort fired off a trio of Killing Curses, followed up by a blast of potent Fiendfyre. Dumbledore raised a golden shield to ward off the Fiendfyre, dodging the Killing Curses with surprising agility for a man his age. Voldemort was moving with inhuman speed, the magical fire licking at his robes and head merely the visual display of his power being used to its fullest. Dumbledore’s wand was a blur as he parried Voldemort’s curses, with the Headmaster still finding it in him to transfigure rocks and other pieces of rubble into various chains, ropes and vicious snarling creatures, all of which he hurled at Voldemort.

A lightning spell arced across the small gap between the two duellists, skilfully countered by Dumbledore and turned into a powerful jet of steam, which Voldemort deflected towards the ceiling. A ray of burning, intense light was reflected in a conjured mirror by Voldemort, and Dumbledore was forced to end the spell so as not to burn and blind himself. A pair of piercing curses collided in mid air and ricocheted with a ping; a cutting curse was turned aside by a blue shield. Dumbledore jumped to dodge a blood-boiling curse, Voldemort parried a devastating bolt of fiery energy.

The Dark Lord skilfully twirled his wand, launching a green ball of fire from the end of it, which he followed up with a pair of flaming spikes of metal. Dumbledore slashed his wand in front of him, shouting an incantation which blasted the attack aside.

Voldemort backhanded a retaliatory silver jet of light from Dumbledore with a fiery hand – the spell blew apart in a flash of light, and Voldemort replied with a small storm of hot metal shards which shot out of the end of his wand. Dumbledore nonchalantly transfigured the metal into twittering canaries, and promptly blew them aside with a concentrated jet of pressurised water. Riddle’s crimson eyes widened and he narrowly dodged the water, which was

instantly turned into ice with a tap of his wand and shattered with his free hand in a devastating punch. He fired off a pair of Liquefaction curses at Dumbledore, both of which went wide, before rushing up to close the gap between the two titans of magic – he had learned a valuable lesson from his duels with Harry.

Dumbledore tried to backpedal to keep the distance between him and the Dark Lord, but Voldemort was simply too quick, firing off a Killing Curse to keep Dumbledore on the back foot as he shouldered the Headmaster, in an uncanny duplication of Harry's physical attacks on Voldemort himself. Dumbledore was by no means frail – his long robes concealed a surprisingly athletic body for a man his age, but Voldemort's attack knocked the wind out of him and he fell backwards, wheezing. With a wave of his wand he blasted the burning Dark Lord away, but was forced to roll aside to avoid another Killing Curse.

Voldemort saw his chance, lashing out with a cutting curse and crowing with victory as he caught Dumbledore on the arm, opening it up in a spray of blood which stained the Headmaster's red robes. Dumbledore moaned quietly in pain, batting aside two further curses from the flame-wreathed Dark Lord, but was hit in the abdomen by a Bludgeoning curse where he lay on the floor. Voldemort saw his opening and followed up with a vicious piercing spell, which blew a hole into Dumbledore's chest in a spray of claret, as Dumbledore hissed in shock.

“And so ends the tenure of Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts,” Voldemort said mockingly, as Dumbledore's wand was yanked out of the Headmaster's hand by a flick of Voldemort's wand. The Dark Lord gestured with his hand, and the air distorted for a moment. Dumbledore's chest gave an audible crack as the spell hit, with his robes sagging slightly as his ribs cracked in several places. The Headmaster's eyes rolled in his head, and his wand hand twitched as he sought frantically to cast a wandless healing spell.

“But first...” Voldemort said, his eyes not leaving Dumbledore's wheezing body. “AVADA KEDAVRA!”

A green jet of light shot from his wand, but didn't hit Dumbledore... instead it veered off over Voldemort's head, slamming into a red-and-gold bird which had appeared silently overhead. Fawkes the Phoenix gave a mournful cry before exploding into an ugly chick, which fell unceremoniously to the floor, where Voldemort casually banished it out of Hogwarts' open main doors.

"NO!" a female voice shrieked from the top of the stairs. "NO!"

Minerva McGonagall, flanked by a trio of Aurors, one Seventh Year student (who was looking completely terrified) and Professors Trelawney and Vector.

Voldemort hissed in abject rage, the black fire about his body burning out as he let his grip on his considerable powers slip for a moment. Dumbledore spluttered where he lay, slumped against a wall of the Entrance Hall, near to the broom cupboard where Snape was stuffed inside. The Great Hall battle still raged behind the closed doors leading into it, showing no signs of abating. Outside Hogwarts was apparently silence.

With a casual flick, Voldemort launched another red piercing curse into Dumbledore, the spell drilling a coin-sized hole in the Headmaster's chest. McGonagall shrieked in anger, and the other wizards and witches shouted in shock, before Dumbledore weakly raised his hand and waved it at his own body, sending himself into a deep healing sleep with a warm golden glow. With a final sigh his body relaxed, his robes slowly staining with blood.

McGonagall waved her wand, animating several fallen suits of armour with an effortless spell. The Aurors, spurred into action, rained down a complex chain of spells onto the Dark Lord, who lazily batted them away with his free hand, dodging some of the more potent ones as he stood in the Hall below them.

McGonagall's suits of armour charged down the stairs, clattering and clanking while waving ancient broadswords and flails in the air. McGonagall herself motioned for her followers to attack the Dark Lord, but everyone was interrupted by the sight of a bedraggled white figure staggering to the doors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and

Wizardry, through the front doors where a storm was raging outside. A muddied, bloodied, stained figure, covered in dust and looking thoroughly dead, despite still being on his feet.

Harry Potter.

Earlier

“H...Harry?” he heard a high pitched voice squeak. With a small groan he turned his head, with effort and wincing at the grating sound that accompanied it, and looked across the windowless dormitory to see a small huddle of students, but two in particular.

He tried to hide his shock when he saw who had spoken. Ron and Hermione, naught but terrified children were staring at him in shock, their eyes transfixed on his pale forehead, where his lightning-bolt scar stood out against his pasty flesh.

Harry’s vision blurred, and a spike of pain shot through his head as he processed his friends standing there, amongst his old classmates. He blinked, shaking his head, but couldn’t get double image of Ron and Hermione out of his head – the two horrified children, flanked by their peers, and the two imagined solemn adults standing behind them.

Ron, scarred but smiling, giving Harry a knowing nod. Hermione, tall and proud and beautiful giving him a reassuring smile. In front of them was a pair of kids, barely in their third year of schooling. Not his friends that he remembered and who died with him, but still friends willing to stand by him.

“Harry?” Hermione squeaked, and the Seventh year, a tall blond boy, stood bravely in front of them, his wand raised. A chill wind blew through the hole in the wall, and it gradually started raining, droplets pattering in onto the thick dormitory carpet.

“Harry?” Ron said, quietly. Harry shifted, struggled, tried to get up from where he lay amidst the rubble and debris, and lay still, unable to tear his gaze away from his vision of his old friends.

“I...I...” he began, trying to shake the image of his dead friends from his view, trying to focus on what was real.

“Come on mate,” the older Ron said, although only Harry could hear him. “Time to finish this, yeah?”

“Go, Harry,” the older Hermione said, with an encouraging smile. Harry’s mouth opened, as though he was about to say something, but nothing came as he stared doggedly at a spot over the assembled childrens’ heads, at phantasms of his past only he could see.

Another spike of hot pain drove through his brain, just behind his eyes, and he screwed up his face in agony. His body gave one last juddering spasm and he felt a wave of lethargy overcome him, vanishing just as quickly as it came. When he opened his eyes again, Harry saw only the terrified faces of the Gryffindors; the older Ron and Hermione were gone.

“Who are you?” The Seventh year asked, training his wand on Harry.

“I...” Harry began, before Ron interrupted him in high-pitched tones.

“Look at his scar for Merlin’s sake!”

“He can’t be Harry, Harry’s dead!” piped up another Third Year, possibly Parvati.

“He looks dead,” Neville said quietly.

“He just came through the wall!”

“What’s he doing now?”

Harry struggled and managed to roll over, waving his wand weakly at his head to repair the majority of his spinal damage. With a series of pops and crunches, his body contorted and spasmed before realigning itself – something which would have proved to be unbearably traumatic for a living body.

“Oh my god!” Lavender shrieked at the healing. Harry looked at his friends again, who were moving forward, and waved them away.

“Don’t... don’t look at me,” he said, struggling to think what he should say. “Just...”

“Harry?” Ron said again, as Harry finally got to his feet, slightly unsteady. “Whats happened to you mate? We saw you... fighting...”

“You wouldn’t... understand...” Harry said, trying to look everywhere but his best friend, the child who had no idea what Harry had gone through, and what he was about to go through, to save.

“Harry, you’re seriously scaring me,” Hermione said quietly, as the others looked on silently, the seventh year not moving from where he was covering Harry with his wand.

“I can’t tell you, Hermione,” he said softly but firmly, looking at the hole in the wall, where the rainstorm outside was beginning to intensify.

“You’ve been fighting, Harry! We saw you! What’s happened to you?”

Harry gave her a small smile, looking right into her frightened brown eyes. “You wouldn’t...” he looked away, moving towards the hole in the dormitory wall, “You wouldn’t understand... just stay here, its safe...”

“Just tell us,” Ron said defiantly, displaying surprising courage, despite his small frame making it look almost comical. His cheeks were reddening in oncoming anger, his shock and surprise at Harry’s entrance swiftly forgotten.

“Just ask Hermione what she wanted for this year. She’ll know...” Harry said with a crooked smile, his thoughts catching up with him after the trauma of blocking the curse.

Hermione paused for a moment, and her eyes widened in comprehension as Harry turned away, trying to ignore the conflicting feelings that were welling up from seeing his two best friends, and took a running jump out of the hole in the wall he had created. This needed to end.

“WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!” he howled, descending into the storm-lashed night as Hermione’s mind raced with understanding.

“Oh Harry...” she said, her eyes glistening. What had happened to her best friend?

Everyone was interrupted by the sight of a bedraggled white figure staggering to the doors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, through the front doors where a storm was raging outside. A muddied, bloodied, stained figure, covered in dust and looking thoroughly dead, despite still being on his feet.

Harry Potter.

“Potter,” hissed Voldemort, parrying a pair of Auror spells and blasting aside a suit of armour with his free hand, the movement sluggish after his thrashing at Harry’s hands.

“Potter?” McGonagall, Trelawney and Vector said with total surprise. – McGonagall with more surprise than her colleagues, having been privy to most of Harry’s current background.

“Potter?” said the Aurors, in confusion at the Boy-Who-Lived turning up here of all places.

Harry didn't speak, instead taking in the scene. Voldemort was fighting McGonagall, some Aurors and some teachers and students. Dumbledore was on the ground, unconscious or worse.

"Riddle," he said calmly, standing tall, albeit slightly slack and limp after Voldemort's brutal spellwork. "I hope you noticed your distraction wasn't particularly effective."

Voldemort snarled, ducking another curse. "I had."

The Dark Lord was looking spry, despite his earlier wounds. He was probably beginning to hit breaking point, but Harry had no idea what rituals Voldemort had wrought on his body to keep himself going. Any injuries Harry had given him had healed at a highly accelerated rate, so there was no telling what Voldemort was capable of.

"Leave him to me," Harry said, brandishing his wand and waving away his allies at the top of the stairs. Voldemort hissed and lunged forward, loosing off a Killing Curse at Harry from his yew wand, who merely darted back out of the front doors, the rain plastering his black hair to his pasty head as he beckoned to the Dark Lord. McGonagall's suits of armour were banished forcefully away by Voldemort as he stalked towards the entrance doors and out of them, into the howling storm that had brewed.

"Come on then, Riddle," Harry shouted, the rain intensifying as he backed down the gravel path in front of Hogwarts. He felt drunk, his mind fuzzy as he tried to muster his energy to bring Voldemort down, for the final time.

"Potter!" Voldemort howled, slashing his wand downwards to fire off a cutting curse at Harry, who darted aside. "WHY WON'T YOU DIE?"

"I don't care if they gave you the correct codes, I want to know why you sent off two attack helicopters without informing me!" the Prime Minister barked down the phone, flanked by two armed guards. The Wizarding World was in an uproar, from what he could gather – the portrait on his wall had shouted about an attack before freezing solid,

as though it was a non-magical painting, and all the Pacification Forces in Scotland and on assignment in Little Hangleton had gone AWOL, with only one hurried radio transmission to RAF Oban in Scotland.

The two soldiers swung their guns at the fireplace in the Prime Minister's office as he slammed down the phone, as the fireplace had burst into life. Green flames licked at the flue, as a bedraggled figure tumbled through onto the carpet.

"FREEZE!" one of the soldiers shouted, both of them cocking their automatic weapons. "WAND DOWN, HANDS BEHIND YOUR HEAD!"

The figure looked up, and the Prime Minister got to his feet as he recognised Scrimgeour, his opposite number.

"Prime Minister!" Scrimgeour said, as the Prime Minister waved away his soldiers' weapons. The Minister of Magic was covered in gore, his robes were badly singed, and he stank of sweat and blood, looking like he had just come out of a riot. "The Ministry and Hogwarts have been attacked. Our Auror corps have been decimated, and I have no idea what's happening at Hogwarts."

"We received a report from the Pacification Forces posted there that there was an attack, involving giants," the Prime Minister said, sitting down as Scrimgeour got to his feet and sat in an offered chair; the soldiers returned to their attentive positions either side of the Prime Minister.

"Merlin," Scrimgeour replied, as he ran a sweaty hand through his matted hair. The Prime Minister wrinkled his nose at the Minister's body odour; Scrimgeour detected this and wandlessly cast a cleaning charm on himself; in seconds his robes were clean and fresh smelling, as was his hair.

"Our scrying spells have pulled up some stuff from Hogwarts," he continued, "but the wards there are the strongest in Britain; we can't see very much. You-Know-Who is definitely there, but we can't see

much. Apparently His base in Little Hangleton was nailed, which is a good thing I suppose.”

“What are we going to do about this?” The Prime Minister replied. “What would happen if Hogwarts fell? It’s just a school!”

“More than that. It’s a symbol – people would lose hope if it fell, especially if Dumbledore, the headmaster, died. We’re weak enough as it is. No-one can really duel You-Know-Who and live apart from Dumbledore.”

“And the Phoenix, but he’s gone...” The Prime Minister said, tailing off as he was lost in thought. Scrimgeour neglected to inform him that Potter was still alive – too much of a can of worms at this point.

“There were a pair of attack helicopters – flying machines with weaponry on them,” the Prime Minister elaborated upon seeing Scrimgeour’s blank look, “dispatched to Hogwarts following the emergency call, but they’ve aborted following a total electronics failure when they approached the castle. They both nearly crashed.”

“The wards would do that...”

“I can’t get anything to the school in any sort of reasonable time. I’m sorry, Minister. You’re on your own here.”

Scrimgeour nodded gravely, before getting out of his chair. “I’m going to lead what is left of the Auror corps and law enforcement divisions into Hogwarts. The portrait,” he waved vaguely at the portrait of the old man on the wall which connected the two heads of state, “will tell you if anything happens to me. If you don’t have any contact with the Wizarding World for a while after that...” he left the sentence hanging, unsaid. They both knew what would have to happen if Voldemort won – total war between the two societies, before long. The Dark Lord would never be happy with just the Wizarding World.

The Prime Minister got out of his chair, flanked by his stoic armed guards. “Good luck, Minister,” he said, shaking Scrimgeour’s hand. With one last nod, Scrimgeour turned and tossed a handful of Floo

powder pulled from his pocket into the fire; it flared up with a bright green, and he stepped into it.

“MINISTRY OF MAGIC, OPERATIONS ROOM!”

Hogwart’s School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. A potent symbol of the magical world, and one that was being slowly rent apart. Ravenclaw tower had caught fire, thick oily smoke billowing from various windows inside it, as its student body huddled in the highest sealed dormitory. Gryffindor tower had a large hole in it, where the rain from the raging storm was pouring in and soaking the floor of the dormitory. Elsewhere smaller fires blazed, and numerous windows had been blown out.

The grounds were scarred and pitted, and the Forbidden Forest burned in intermittent patches, individual trees gone up in flame.

The fate of the school, however, did not rest with the fighters inside the castle, numerous as they may be. The individuals – Filius Flitwick, Minerva McGonagall, the hordes of faceless death eaters, some members of the vaunted Order of the Phoenix, to name but a few, were not the ones that mattered.

Two men mattered. One was old – nearly seventy years old. Despite this, he looked barely thirty, his body crafted and forged by a hellish demon from a plane of existence he had tapped into through blasphemous rituals. Lord Voldemort, the Heir of Slytherin, the Dark Lord, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. A reborn nightmare whose very name was an object of terror to thousands.

The other man was an enigma. Twenty five, mentally. Thirteen, or so he should be, physically. In reality, a man with a body of about eighteen years of age. A dead man. A man reanimated by an experimental ritual which had gone slightly wrong; despite this, he retained most of his sanity and potent duelling skills. Harry Potter, The Chosen One, The Boy-Who-Lived. Time traveller, masked vigilante, an Inferius. The man who had stood on the precipice of oblivion and willingly hurled himself off of it, to protect his friends.

Together they duelled, in the wind and rain, which lashed at both their bodies. One in the darkest black robes, one in a blinding white, albeit muddied, outfit. Their wands, brothers, flashed and sparked, firing colourful bursts of light at each other and flinging various objects, from sods of earth to sharp blades. Bound by prophecy, by a deflected Killing Curse, by their shared experience of death, by the very brother instruments they used to perform magic... the two men were the axis around which the whole conflict revolved.

Harry Potter. Lord Voldemort. One final duel, in the throes of a storm.

“Orentus!” Voldemort howled, sounding quite mad as he forced Harry back, the rain lashing at his face and plastering his dark hair to his head. A crackling lance of hot metal flew out of the end of his wand, hissing where the rain touched it. Harry, his pale face screwed up in concentration, neatly sidestepped the attack and responded with a delicate flick of his wand, forming a cyclone of water out of the now-torrential rain. Voldemort blew the powerful tornado of water apart, counterattacking with a pair of conjured daggers which shot through the air.

“DIE, POTTER!” he roared, his eyes glowing a dark red as he channelled power down his wand, a demented smile on his face. “JUST DIE!”

Harry ducked the daggers, sliding over the now soaking muddy grass. His white robes were sticking to his skin, his hair getting in his eyes as the heavens opened in a truly epic storm. Above the two fighters a cloud vortex slowly began to form over the castle, the weather itself effected by the vast amounts of magic inside the castle. All the fires in the grounds were long put out – Harry’s world was now darkness, Voldemort, water and mud. He hurled himself to one side to avoid the green flash of a Killing Curse, splashing into the waterlogged muddy ground in a roll, before managing to recover his balance and reply with one of his own. Voldemort barely ducked the attack, and Harry took the opportunity to close the gap between them, slipping and sliding through the sheets of rain that were soaking the pair.

“Arcesso Fiendfyre!” he yelled, his voice barely audible over the roar of the thunderstorm, and an incandescent plume of white-hot fire shot from the end of his holly wand, shooting towards Voldemort’s face, as Harry firmly repressed the thrill of fear his Inferius instincts felt at the sight of flames. The Dark Lord managed to redirect the deadly curse upwards, but Harry managed to score a hit on his side with a wandless Sectumsempra, the wound immediately washed clean by the rain as Voldemort hissed in pain. The sound of the storm was deafening.

“I’ve finished with Dumbledore, Potter. He’s dead,” Voldemort shouted, cauterising his deep side wound with his spare hand, steam rising from his side as he pressed his palm over the cut.

Harry gave Voldemort a hard look, gripping his wand tightly, and said nothing. The pair faced each other for a moment, standing no less than five feet from each other, mutual hatred practically heating up the night air. Then, as one, they struck.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!” Voldemort howled, anger and rage etched into the very contours of his face.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!” Harry replied with a roar. Green light blasted from the end of his wand, lighting up the night for a brief second with an eerie glow, before the two Killing Curses collided and there was a golden flash of colour. Phoenix song burst into existence at a deafening volume, obscuring the sound of the thunderstorm and causing a huge amount of water to instantly evaporate with a hiss. It was tortured song, warped by the negative energies of the curse. A solid beam of light the thickness of a man’s waist connected Harry and Voldemort’s wands for a scant instant, before it was broken and the Priori Incantatem vanished. Harry immediately spat a spell, sending a thick jet of black oil out of his wand, before setting it alight in mid air. The viscous burning pitch splattered onto the sodden ground, managing to set Voldemort’s robes aflame despite the unending storm of rain.

Voldemort growled, putting out the flames with a nonchalant wave of his hand, before backing up, whipping his wand around in a

complicated motion. Harry raised a thick midnight-blue shield in front of him as a black cloud of smoke erupted from the end of Voldemort's wand, obscuring the Dark Lord from view and slamming into the shield, immediately eating away at it with shocking speed, like a powerful acid. Harry barely had a chance to dismiss the shield before a Killing Curse shot through the obscuring curtain of smoke, narrowly missing his ear. He swore and fell backwards, splashing into the waterlogged ground. His vision blurred as water pounded down from the heavens and onto his upturned face.

"DIE!" Harry heard Voldemort shriek, and felt a spell blow through his abdomen and out his back, showering his robes in blood and gore as the magic pulsed through his body. He rolled aside, dodging a follow-up Killing Curse, and managed to scramble to his feet, the rain washing away the viscera that was leaking out of the fist-sized wound. Harry waved his wand weakly, barely deflecting a Decapitation Curse, and struggled to gather his magical reserves around him, knowing that Voldemort had the upper hand, even if he couldn't be easily stopped by his wounds.

He trained his eyes on Voldemort, managing to cast an Impervius charm onto his face to repel the water blinding him, and inhaled. Magical fire blossomed outwards from his chest, engulfing his body in orange-gold flame and evaporating any water that touched him. Squashing the fear that fire now instilled into him, Harry Potter faced down the Dark Lord Voldemort, who also focused his powers to the point where ebony magical fire played about his frame.

"This ends tonight," Harry said firmly, congealed blood still dripping from his stomach wound. Voldemort, by now completely enraged, merely replied with a pair of well-aimed Killing Curses. Harry jinked aside, before bringing up his wand and loosing a trio of deadly curses at a blistering speed – his casting abilities were augmented by the amount of power he was forcing through his body. Voldemort simply howled a spell and the spells shattered in mid flight; Harry was forced to conjure a block of marble to absorb his reply curses. Voldemort began to cast a chain of spells at a rate Harry was hard pressed to counter; the spells flowed into one another, the final syllable of one incantation leading onto the beginning of another. Harry counted a

Blood-Boiler, a Bone-Breaker, a Blinder and a Bludgeoning hex all coming within half a second of one another; he only managed to block them by raising a hefty portion of soil clean out of the ground, where it exploded into flames upon impact with the magic. Voldemort had gone berserk.

Harry ducked a pair of curses and threw himself at the muddy, wet ground in a roll, firing a flare of light out of the end of his wand. Voldemort, concentrating on his superhuman levels of casting speed, roared as the light seared into his retinas, dazing him. Harry leapt out of the roll and charged at Voldemort, covering the small gap between the two magical titans with a single bound. He bent his knees and clenched his free hand, springing up in a devastating uppercut which drove straight into Voldemort's throat.

The Dark Lord spluttered and coughed, deftly blocking the next swing to his face and bringing his knee up to Harry's groin; Harry sidestepped, driving his elbow into Voldemort's cheek. Voldemort attempted to bring his wand to bear but Harry delivered a swift, brutal headbutt while twisting the Dark Lord's bony wrist, causing Voldemort's grip to slacken, sending his wand tumbling to the muddy earth. Harry similarly tossed his wand aside, grabbing Voldemort by the lapels and delivering another headbutt. Voldemort, gagging from the punch to his throat and the repeated head blows, wormed his way out of Harry's grip, blowing the Boy-Who-Lived back a few feet with a powerful wandless banish. Harry immediately lunged forwards once more, illuminating the surrounding grass and sending refractions through the rain with the magical fire coating his body, and swung a hard hit to Voldemort's stomach; the Dark Lord blocked the blow and replied with a short, but powerful strike from his knee to Harry's stomach, which did nothing to the undead Inferius. Voldemort's eyes, glowing red from concentrating his magical power, widened in horror as he realised Harry was almost unstoppable in such a physical confrontation. He swung a punch to the Boy-Who-Lived's face, and Harry took the blow head on, his head turning slightly to the side with the force of impact, but he was otherwise unfazed, proving Voldemort's sickening realisation.

With a grim smile, Harry then grabbed the Dark Lord by the shoulders, driving his knee into Voldemort's groin and sending the Dark Lord

sprawling backwards into the muddy, soaking grass, the black fire coating his body guttering and dying as he retched from the powerful blow. Harry immediately launched himself at Voldemort, driving his fist into the Dark Lord's nose for the second time that night. Voldemort's head snapped backwards into the ground, practically submerged by the sheer volume of rain splattering down on the two of them. He fumbled frantically for his wand, but Harry banished it away with a casual flick, managing to summon his own with another wave of his hand. He knelt by Voldemort, who was struggling for breath, and delivered another punch to the Dark Lord's throat, causing thick ropes of saliva to splatter from Voldemort's mouth, his hair now a stringy mess which clung to his face.

"P-Potter," Voldemort choked, as Harry restrained him with a powerful Body Bind, his face soaked in water and his own spittle, blood leaking from both his nostrils in thin rills. "This... is not over," he wheezed, his throat purple with severe bruising.

"My entire life has been fighting you," Harry shouted over the rain, his face inches from Voldemort's as it splashed down all around them – as he spoke the golden fire surrounding him died down. "I've cheated death twice, and travelled through time itself to find and destroy you. This ends now, Riddle." Voldemort twitched as Harry placed his holly wand squarely on Voldemort's forehead.

"Do it then, Potter," he spluttered, before switching to a hissing, spitting language – Parseltongue. "I have not lost this. I've killed Dumbledore, the Ministry is mine. You've lost. I will always be back. I have taken steps that you could never understand, performed rituals that would send you insane. I killed you Potter. I'll do it again..."

"Not without your Horcruxes," Harry hissed back, pushing the wand in harder. "I told you, I got them all. I doubt the forces you bargained with to receive this new body will be very happy with your attempted duplicity. The reign of Lord Voldemort ends here, Riddle."

He took a breath, forcibly inflating his deceased lungs. With one last look at the bruised, bloodied face of Lord Voldemort, as the most dangerous Dark Lord in centuries floundered and gasped on his back

like a crippled insect amidst the howling fury of a thunderstorm, Harry Potter bellowed two words, concentrating his righteous fury into the small stick in his hand.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

CHP33